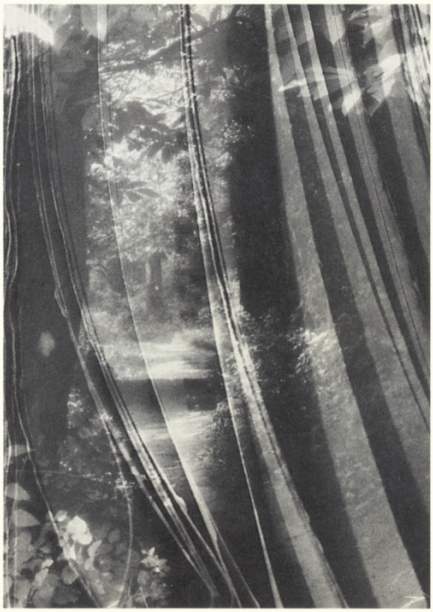
Poetry & Possibility



Michael Edwards

A Study in the Power and Mystery of Words

POETRY AND POSSIBILITY

Also by Michael Edwards

Criticism
LA TRAGÉDIE RACINIENNE
*TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN POETICS

Poetry
TO KINDLE THE STARLING
WHERE
THE BALLAD OF MOBB CONROY
THE MAGIC, UNQUIET BODY

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Poetry and Possibility

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For Paul

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Preface

In the following work I explore something of the beginnings and ends of poetry, on the understanding that poetry is written and read in a world one way or another fallen, and that the fallen, mortal world presents writers and readers alike with their most fundamental problems. The search for beginnings will involve the ambiguity of origins, and the archaic yet always modern topic of inspiration, of the Muse. The search for ends will be concerned with the power of poetry in the world: with its ability, or otherwise, to counter the fall, its relation to the possibility both of the world and of the word.

The focus throughout is the capacity of poetic language to engage with a real world and also with transcendence, and the limitations of that capacity. The centre of the book is a repeated and always varying meditation on a single conviction, as expressed by Coleridge, that the imagination is a 'modifying power' whose force depends on a corresponding sense of fact. What impressed Coleridge in Wordsworth's 'Guilt and Sorrow', according to the fourth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*, was its 'fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed', and he returns in chapter 14 to their conversations at Racedown, about the need for 'a faithful adherence to the truth of nature' combined with 'the modifying colours of imagination'.

I shall be considering poetry as changing the world in the way we see it, and as changing language, and also considering the wider context for that change; I shall look for preference to poetry that sees the visible world itself as possibility, as the threshold to a world remade. It is remarkable just how much poetry has those interests. Such ambitions are at the same time disquieting, and I shall be equally concerned with suspicion of the suasion of poetry, of the ascendancy of the imagination, of the very desire for reality to be other (poets share a wish to rename everything with Quijote), and so with the practice of subversion.

The successive chapters study a number of different poets. I begin with Milton because he not only wrote in a world that he knew to be fallen, and in the expectation of its renewal, but he actually had as his theme the fall from paradise and the possibility of paradise being regained. *Paradise Lost* is seen as enacting a quest

for the troubled sources of poetry, and as exercising poetry's redoubtable power. The other poets I chose because they offer sharp new perspectives on to the subject, and I also introduce three French poets, Boileau by way of comparison and for the beauty of his discussion of periphrasis, La Fontaine and Yves Bonnefoy since they provide kinds of writing and thinking not available in English.

My approach has not been historical: it is the continuities of the problem that interest me, and the fact that the problem continues, and I have written about those poets from whom I have learnt (and about whom I had something to say), trying not to impose on them but to think with them. On the other hand, I have wanted to reflect on a variety of poetic experiences, and Renaissance, Augustan, Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist approaches are represented here. The world in which the poets write is also changing through time, and becoming increasingly secular.

There is no conclusion, since the questions to which I turn are open to new responses from the future. My 'conclusion' is to end with three contemporary poets for whom these matters are of importance.

Wivenhoe M. E.

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l'obscur possible terrestre
Yves BONNEFOY

all
the kingdoms of possibilities
Charles TOMLINSON

1

Writing Paradise Lost

Some well known lines overheard in the ninth Book of *Paradise Lost*:

> ... If answerable style I can obtain
> Of my celestial patroness, who deigns
> Her nightly visitation unimplored,
> And dictates to me slumb'ring, or inspires
> Easy my unpremeditated verse
> ...
> ... unless an age too late, or cold
> Climate, or years damp my intended wing
> Depressed, and much they may, if all be mine,
> Not hers who brings it nightly to my ear.
>
> (ll. 20–47)[1]

This is surely astonishing. What strikes me is not the working up of a figurative muse but, first, a certain tone of voice, intimate, and tender, and quiet, which is new in the poem; then a real, feminine presence, to whom the masculine poet is submissive ('if all be mine,/Not hers') and full of wonder ('who deigns', 'who brings it nightly'); and a reality of inspiration which causes Milton, of all poets, to refer to his verse as 'unpremeditated' and to himself as 'slumb'ring'.

When faced with such a passage, the scholar's resource might be to study 'Urania', as Milton calls the Muse in Book VII, and to trace her development in the Renaissance from the muse of astronomy to the muse of religious poetry, with special reference to the poem *Uranie* of the Frenchman Du Bartas; he might also reflect on the problem of a Christian poet entertaining a muse who is classical and pagan, and on his motive for doing so. One can benefit from both the study and the reflection. The danger, however, is that the lines may slip away, through a merely formal recognition that poets depend on inspiration, or through an assumption that Milton only

refers to a muse because of the kind of poem he is writing, as if the epic muse were a product of the genre. Yet in the lived experience of writing poetry, that dependence is real; and for the Christian poet in particular, the acknowledgement that the Spirit of God, to rename the inspirer, will only 'touch and purify the lips', as Milton puts it elsewhere, 'of whom he pleases', is more than a pious thought.[2]

Which is not to deny that, if the encounter with the Muse is far from conventional, it *is* artificial. Consider the voice that is speaking the lines. While it would seem self-defeating to insist, under the pressure of Jacques Derrida, that 'voice' in poetry has been replaced by 'text' – which must be a recipe for holding the words, as it were, at mind's length rather than hear what they have to say – a sense of how language works and of how we work language makes it difficult to claim that the voice here gives direct access to the man, to unmediated Milton. It suggests that Milton is creating his voice in and for *Paradise Lost*, and that at this moment in the poem the tone of voice, the style of presence, which he requires is the one which he has fashioned. To agree to this means recognising simply that in any formal situation, whether a poem or, as for ancient rhetoricians, an address to a law-court or senate, there is always something which supervenes upon spontaneity, and that this something is art. Indeed, while it is possible to imagine a perfect and continuous spontaneity in an unfallen world, if there has been a Fall there is now always a gap, a difference. It is this, after all, which is the opportunity for art, and for morality, as for hypocrisy and for lies; for self-knowledge as for self-dramatisation.

The largest meaning of the passage, and of its placing at the beginning of Book IX, is surely to be understood, not surprisingly, in terms of Milton's theology. It occurs in a poem whose subject is the Fall, yet which, having announced the Fall in its first line, has been moving towards and away from it through a whole eight books and is only now on the point of recounting it. If Milton pauses yet again to declare his need of assistance, and to stress far more than on other occasions his inability to write, isn't this because he is concerned with the problem of writing in a world which is still suffering the consequence of that Fall? He explores the problem via the conviction that all that he can produce himself, all that is merely his ('mine'), will necessarily be inadequate. He will only be able to continue if he can 'obtain' a style, being in the position of a suppliant; and despite what one gathers from elsewhere to be his massive confidence in his ability, I assume that when he says 'If', he

means it. The remainder of the poem, at this stage of its elaboration, really is in the balance, and dependent on a power which Milton cannot control. Whatever comes to him, moreover, if it is of value, will not only have its source elsewhere but will actually belong elsewhere: it will be, in a steep and suggestive sense which I am not sure of understanding, 'hers'.

When verses do occur, on the other hand, they seem to bring Milton something of the prelapsarian experience of Adam and Eve. It has often been noted that his 'unpremeditated verse' links him to the 'unmeditated' strains of their morning hymn in Book V:

> Lowly they bowed adoring, and began
> Their orisons, each morning duly paid
> In various style, for neither various style
> Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise
> Their Maker, in fit strains pronounced or sung
> Unmeditated; such prompt eloquence
> Flowed from their lips, in prose or numerous verse ...
>
> (ll. 144–50)

Isn't Milton writing, in fact, with this whole passage in mind? The orisons of Eden are already works of art – or rather, they have a prompt and natural eloquence, an effortless variety of style and shapeliness of utterance whether in prose or verse or song, to which our own laborious and exilic art aspires; while their makers have no experience of 'want', or lack. Milton is located in night rather than in a paradisal morning, and has to reach for a 'style', but when he does obtain it his 'verse' gives him access to that primal felicity. The change from 'unmeditated' to 'unpremeditated' would seem to stress, by denying it on this occasion, the strenuousness of thought normal in a fallen world: Adam and Eve have no need to meditate before saying or singing, while Milton can avoid a long process of *pre*meditation where the prefix measures a toilsomeness of time unknown to the first pair. The accent falls, in fact, on 'Easy', because of its placing in the line, and the word offers a diversity of meaning through its placing in the phrase, by allowing one to read 'easily inspires my verse', or 'inspires, an easy patroness, my verse', or 'my easy and unpremeditated verse'. It suggests an Edenic freedom by its own absence of constraint.

Does the fact that his patroness comes 'unimplored' also look beyond the Fall, so as to offer Milton in the act of composition an experience not only of Eden but of grace? The hint of this, a small one, occurs even earlier, in Book III. When the Son offers to die for mankind, he refers to grace as a feminine figure; and since he describes her to the Father as someone who 'finds her way ... To visit all thy creatures', and who 'to all/Comes unprevented, unimplored, unsought' (ll. 228–31), the reader may be invited to recall the passage when considering the unimplored visitation of Urania.

It is tempting to think that Milton is high-writing the whole affair, and making much ado about a relatively ordinary experience of putting together, with some facility, verses that pleased him. Dr Johnson, while leaving the celestial patroness without comment, did take seriously the possibility that Milton composed at speed, but with a matter-of-factness which may be reductive. Referring to this passage in his *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson argues that all we know of Milton's writing methods is what he has told us, which includes the fact 'that he poured out with great fluency his *unpremeditated verse*', and he continues: 'Versification, free, like his, from the distresses of rhyme, must, by a work so long, be made prompt and habitual; and, when his thoughts were once adjusted, the words would come at his command.' I am not sure which I find more amazing, Milton's claim to write unpremeditated verse or Johnson's calm explanation of how he did so! It is true that Johnson himself seems to have been able to compose fluently and at length, to a degree that can make one feel foolish, and he may simply be right. He also sees the question from the inside of a period from which we are now very distant. His conclusion echoes a famous couplet in Boileau's *Art poétique* (I 153–4), which itself echoes Horace: 'Ce que l'on conçoit bien s'énonce clairement, / Et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément', 'What one thinks out well expresses itself clearly, and the words for saying it come easily'. Part of the unease which this ease is likely to cause now derives no doubt from suspicion of a poetics which assumes that ideas can be fully present before any words that convey them; and it may be that, whatever we may think of it, this habit of thought and mode of composition really did lead to a considerable dexterity.

Nevertheless, certain details surely suggest, if we need them, that something more provocative is being said in these lines, and that we might wonder – if we are surprised at Milton writing without

'premeditation', or being 'dictated' to – what he must have felt himself.... One such is 'slumb'ring'. Part of the word's meaning is no doubt that Milton's mind continued applying itself to his poem while he was asleep or half-asleep (Urania also visits his 'slumbers' nightly in VII 29), and that he found it well-nigh ready for him on awaking. Does it also mean, though, that, however aware Milton is of consciously working the poem, from planning its large-scale development to testing its local sounds and cadences, the actual lines, part-lines and maybe paragraphs which come to him as the ones that he finally wants do indeed *come*, as if from someone else? In certain acts of creation he finds himself passive or, better, almost passive – slumbering rather than sleeping – so as to receive the matter of his poem; lines arrive from far away, or from deep within, and he seems merely to copy them, I assume intermittently, under dictation.

He has already hinted at something like this during the invocation of the third book, where, in the course of his own 'nightly visitations' to the springs of poetry, he claims to 'feed on thoughts that voluntary move / Harmonious numbers' (ll. 37–8). As Donald Davie has noted, because of the turn of the line the thoughts both 'move' in themselves and also 'move' harmonious numbers: the 'flicker of hesitation' enables one to see that the numbers are not something extra to the thoughts but 'the very thoughts themselves, seen under a new aspect'.[3] Davie's is the perception of a poet. Milton is describing, it seems, a pitch of creativity but also of detachment, where the mind, 'feeding', observes and hears the simultaneous passage of thoughts and of words in measured rhythms. 'Move', by allowing two readings, and by moving in two directions, itself works 'voluntary' or freely, and recalls 'Easy' in Book IX. It also contributes to a most beautiful and accurate description of the bearing of thoughts on poetry, when the writing is successful: thoughts moving in the verse and thoughts moving the verse.

Milton's is surely a more plausible account than Boileau's of the possibility of an easy commerce of conceptions and words. The suggestions of the passage are fulfilled, moreover, in its continuation:

> as the wakeful bird
> Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
> Tunes her nocturnal note.

The idea of almost undergoing poetry is reinforced by the instinctive singing of the bird. The obscurity of the source of poetry is insinuated powerfully but without emphasis by the nightingale being placed in the sequence 'darkling', 'in shadiest covert hid', and 'nocturnal'. The strange collaboration of activity and passivity is caught in the combination of that darkness with the reference, quickly passed over, to the bird as 'wakeful'. Even the syntactic fluidity continues: '*as* the wakeful bird / Sings darkling' means that Milton feeds on such thoughts at the time when the nightingale sings and, also, in the same manner as the nightingale singing.

It is open to each reader to respond to this tale of inspiration, which is both a psychology of composition and the description of a practice of writing, according to his own experience in this field or any other. One might want now to invoke the unconscious, or the preconscious; and if it is difficult at first to see how Milton would represent such an idea to himself, one remembers the 'vast abyss' to which he refers at the outset of the poem. It may be a way of describing that otherness in spatial terms, and I shall return to it. As for the Muse in the encounter: it seems significant that Milton does not name her. The presence that he evokes on this occasion is of a mysterious She, who comes bearing gifts and who chooses the night. To understand her we shall need to enter that night, and to see it in relation to the other darknesses of the poem. The fact that she is female, however, is related to his writer's awareness as already suggested in these lines. Rather than simply following the conventional attribution of femininity to the Muses (itself, of course, a matter of some interest, and in no way an inert mere fact), isn't he recreating for himself and for his reader what he sees as the feminine experience of his writing? Leaving in abeyance the masculine, wilful making of the epic, in its structuring and argumentation, he turns here to the feminine, almost passive, finding of verse. He is obliged to exercise his masculinity in labouring at his poem, being under the curse of Adam, but discovers a feminine receptivity as and when that poem is given him.

(The Muse also seems to be a kind of Mother, who enables the poet, as it were, to re-enter the womb – of Eve and of the Earth – and to be born into our first world.)

For a poet like Milton, a poet, let us say, open, if only by moments, to mystery, to write is to encounter something beyond oneself, to receive a 'visitation' from the 'unimplored', and to know

(though this must be an extreme of the experience, or an extreme way of describing it) a kind of 'dictation'. It is to become aware, out of one's own lack, of a transcendence, which one may wish to call a Muse, or God, or perhaps to leave nameless. It is also to be issued into at least a hint of Eden, and maybe of grace. That Milton in particular should draw attention to this is singularly appropriate, since he is not only writing in a fallen world while aiming beyond it, but is actually writing about the Fall, and involving himself in it. His poem is quite overtly produced by a fallen man in a fallen world, and he cannot offer it as if the Fall had not occurred. In a very real sense, he cannot write even of the Fall, he is incapable of writing *Paradise Lost*, unless someone 'deigns'.

* * *

The involvement and its dangers show through in the poem's other invocations. The fact that there are four of these is itself significant. Milton has multiplied the invocations of Homer and Virgil so as to discuss his work in the course of writing it, like Dante, but the relative frequency and regularity of his interventions (in the twelve-book distribution they introduce the first and third books of each half) relate them to a poem closer to us in time, Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Like Eliot, Milton is present in the work as someone who needs, no less than the reader, the illumination for which the work is reaching, and in whose historical circumstances the poem, in intention true-for-all-time, is grounded, whether these are the end of the Commonwealth and the Restoration or *l'entre deux guerres* and the Second World War. Like Eliot also, however, he is most evidently present as someone who is writing. The invocations draw attention to the fact that a poem is under way, and that if Milton is voyaging through Hell, Chaos, Heaven, and Earth, he is engaged in the voyage specifically as a writer. His engagement is central to the poem's theme of paradise lost and of the hope attendant on that loss, and these 'extrinsic paragraphs', these 'digressions' and 'superfluities' as Johnson called them, are entrances into Milton's most inward project.

(There is no Muse in *Four Quartets*. In the Dantesque passage of 'Little Gidding', however, which enacts a moment of creativity and is introduced by disturbed references to inspiration – to a 'dove' that is also an enemy bomber and a 'wind' that blows dead leaves – a composite 'master', who is in part Milton, does visit the poet, by

night and unimplored, so as to bring him 'the communication / Of the dead ... tongued with fire'. It is a suggestively modern version of a writer's dealings with the Muse, and particularly appropriate to Eliot, whose texts are thoroughly 'inspired' by other writers.)

In the first invocation, at the opening of Book I, Milton is already requesting the aid of the 'Heav'nly Muse', but the surprise comes when he addresses the Spirit:

> Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
> Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
> Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss
> And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
> Illumine, what is low raise and support ...
>
> (ll. 19–23)

Read in isolation, a prayer to be illumined and raised is quite straightforward. In the context, however, it takes on a precise and unexpected colouring. The phrase, 'what in me is dark', where the stress falls on the pronoun, means 'what in me, as in the original abyss, is dark', and Milton is in effect asking God to illumine him by saying over his darkness too, 'Let there be light'. He presents himself as a darkness over which creativity hovers, and also as an abyss, since his prayer to be raised to the 'highth' of his argument (l. 24) ripples back to line 10, where the heavens and earth 'Rose out of Chaos'. At the outset of writing he claims to know himself as a primal darkness, and as a chasm under the 'mighty wings' of an otherness.

It is not only that, as the Spirit presided over the Creation in the opening sentences of the Bible, so He presides over the creation of Milton's poem in the opening sentences of *Paradise Lost*; nor even that Milton resembles God in being a creator. He has transformed that Renaissance comparison, by seeing himself as not only creating out of darkness and the abyss but as also being the darkness and abyss from which creation emerges.

And the bearing of creation to darkness is ambiguous. We might expect Satan, when on the point of inventing gunpowder (VI 470–95), to speak of the plants and gems of heaven as rising from 'materials dark and crude' situated 'Deep under ground' and as having in 'the deep', according to a potent phrase, their 'dark nativity'. Yet Milton himself has already referred in a similar way to

the confused elements of Chaos as being the 'dark materials' of God's creation (II 916). It is true that Satan describes the transformation of the darkness into the 'ambient light' of heaven. Nevertheless, the very materials that become celestial flowers and gold will also produce an infernal instrument of destruction; and because of the postlapsarian connotations of 'dark', there is something disturbing in the idea that God, rather than overcoming darkness in the act of creation, uses its materials.

The relation of the abyss or Chaos to Hell is even more equivocal. According to the spatial scheme of the poem they are separate domains, the one placed beneath the other, yet from the beginning certain terms used in their description seem deliberately to confuse them. The 'vast abyss' over which the creative Spirit broods in line 21, where the etymological sense of 'waste' is present alongside immensity, is recalled in the 'waste and wild' situation to which Satan awakes in Hell only thirty-nine lines later. It is Chaos in the second Book that appears as a 'wasteful deep' (l. 961) and a 'wild abyss' (l. 910), while its 'dark unbottomed infinite abyss' (l. 405) again resembles Hell's 'bottomless' perdition (I 47). The moment of greatest complicity occurs during Raphael's account of the creation in Book VII. Entering further into the activities of the Spirit of God brooding on the waters, he declares that he 'downward purged / The black tartareous cold infernal dregs / Adverse to life' (ll/ 237–9). The abyss contains, surely, the possibility both of the created universe and of Hell, and the latter point is emphasised by the pleonasm of 'tartareous ... infernal', where, whatever else 'tartareous' may mean, it must suggest Tartarus, a region of the classical underworld whose name is actually used for Hell elsewhere in the poem. In fact, when Milton added the prose 'Argument' in the fourth issue of 1668, he declared explicitly what the poem only implies, by stating that the 'hell' into which Satan and his crew have fallen is situated in a place 'fitliest called Chaos'. In the second edition of 1674, the Argument was divided among the separate books, with the result that the reader is now hurried quickly from this involvement of Chaos with Hell to the reference in the opening lines of the poem itself to the heavens and the earth rising out of Chaos.

It is not the theological implications of this that I want to pursue. What interests me is Milton's sense of the ambiguity of the sources of creation, and of the danger of penetrating a darkness and an abyss of creativity which are necessarily involved with hell. It is

remarkable, indeed, that he relies on the Muse not only for inspiration but for protection. Having addressed the Light in the exordium of Book III with the words, 'Thee I revisit', he repeats the phrase only eight lines later with the addition of an adjective which the repetition underscores: 'Thee I revisit safe'. He has 'Escaped' from Hell and Chaos, and he has done so 'Taught by the Heav'nly Muse', though since he has not 'really' been in hell, it is true that we might read this fear for his safety as a poetic fiction. Yet in the invocation of Book VII, where he has been voyaging, on the contrary, in heaven, he again declares, and with similar emphasis, that he was led upwards by Urania and 'with like safety guided down' (l. 15) and that, standing once more on earth, he can sing 'More safe' (l. 24). There is again a simple reading: the 'empyreal' air that he has breathed (l. 14) was traditionally fatal to men, while in 'presuming' to describe the heaven of heavens (l. 13) he may have re-enacted the 'presumption' of Eve (IX 921). Another poetic fiction would be combined with the genuine anxiety of a Christian writer. It is precisely this passage, however, that explores the menace to Milton at great length, and that includes a puzzling variety of fears remotely metaphorical. His first prayer to be protected transforms its fiction in its conclusion:

> Return me to my native element,
> Lest from this flying steed unreined (as once
> Bellerophon, though from a lower clime)
> Dismounted, on th'Aleian field I fall,
> Erroneous there to wander and forlorn.
>
> (ll. 16–20)

The extraordinary power of the last line, where 'Erroneous' is both, etymologically, a pleonasm for 'wander' and a hint that Milton may be thoroughly in the wrong, seems in excess of what he could fear for himself. It is true that he has such a fund of phrasing at his disposal that any sense of exaggeration may come simply from the size that his statements so easily acquire. Nevertheless, the experience from which he shrinks seems real enough, if difficult to grasp, and the at once inexplicit and overstated dread continues, for he also prays:

> But drive far off the barbarous dissonance
> Of Bacchus and his revelers, the race
> Of that wild rout that tore the Thracian bard
> In Rhodope, where woods and rocks had ears
> To rapture, till the savage clamour drowned
> Both harp and voice; nor could the Muse defend
> Her son. So fail not thou who thee implores ...
>
> (ll. 32–8)

The enemy is the Restoration, but even if Orpheus stands traditionally for the poet destroyed by a hostile world, the intensity of Milton's fear surpasses the reality of his political situation, and any reprisals to be inflicted by the new regime can only with some licence be compared to being torn apart by maenads.

One part of his fear begins to express itself in his earlier reference to having survived the Commonwealth:

> More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
> To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
> On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues ...
>
> (ll. 24–6)

The repetition of the syntactical pattern makes a sequence of 'evil tongues', 'barbarous dissonance' and 'savage clamour', and suggests a dread that his own words as a writer might be not only 'drowned' by the barbarousness – that is, according to its derivation, the stammering unintelligibility – of the voices of a fallen world but invaded by the evil of a language itself fallen and 'infected' (X 608). That he is thinking of the inner menace he faces as a writer as well as the outer menace he faces as a citizen is clear from his appeal to be defended specifically by the Muse.

(The passage resembles the fifth section of Eliot's 'Burnt Norton', where the poet in the act of writing is also assailed, like the Word in the desert, by alien voices. Eliot draws his vocabulary, in fact, from the end of the ode 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', where Milton evokes the 'shriek', the 'loud lament' and the dismal 'dance' of the gods and votaries of the pagan religions who have been made dumb by the new birth.)

Milton is writing about paradise lost and is himself involved in that loss; he does not compose his lamentation of 'all our woe' from the outside, as if he alone were exempt from it. As a writer, he penetrates the ambiguous darkness and abyss of his own creativity, the infection of his own language. Whereas the Spirit could remain above Chaos and 'purge' its infernal elements, Milton inhabits a world now made 'one realm' with Hell, and is himself vulnerable to the 'easy thoroughfare' downwards (X 391–3). Hence, presumably, his calling on a Muse who visits him by night. Whatever the autobiographical source, at moments in the poem he experiences in writing a kind of soft obscurity, a gentle, feminine darkness, quite different from the hazardous dark of Chaos and Hell.

* * *

Milton's adventure as a writer is also enacted in the poem's narrative. 'Adventure' is, of course, a word operative in the work: just as his ambition in line 16 to pursue 'Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme' is disturbed by the fact that he is recounting a fatal temptation, so the meaning of his 'advent'rous song' in line 13 is sounded by later references to the 'vent'rous arm' of Satan plucking the fruit in Eve's dream (V 64), and to 'advent'rous Eve' doing likewise in reality (IX 921). The adventure is specifically a flight: 'no middle flight' according to this same opening passage (l. 14) and, according to the passage which deliberately recalls it when introducing the poem's second half, a soaring 'Above the flight of Pegasean wing' (VII 4). On the first mention, Milton contrasts the possible rashness of his enterprise unemphatically with the ease of the creative Spirit, brooding on the abyss 'with mighty wings outspread' (l. 20); at the recall occurs that fear of being unreined from the flying steed and so 'falling' (VII 19), which, whatever its significance as dream imagery, looks like a reference to the Fall itself. To ride the winged horse of poetry too daringly is to imitate but perhaps also to rival the Dove of divine creation, with that 'presumption' that I mentioned earlier. It seems right that at least part of the concern of a Christian poet should be not to intrude on God's privilege, and Milton's theme, after all, is precisely such an intrusion by Adam and Eve.

His poem begins, moreover, no less than Dante's *Commedia*, in Hell, and spends its first two books in a flight through Hell and Chaos. Within the story, that flight is Satan's, and the reader can

well be pulled up by Milton's allusion in the invocation of Book III to 'my flight / Through utter and through middle darkness' (ll. 15–16). Although Milton continually dissociates himself from Satan, and is in a way his victorious adversary, there is sufficient ambivalence in their narrative relationship for Satan's voyage to be Milton's. When Beelzebub at the council in Hell calls for a volunteer to travel to Earth by flinging himself into Chaos:

> Who shall tempt with wand'ring feet
> The dark unbottomed infinite abyss
> And through the palpable obscure find out
> His uncouth way, or spread his airy flight
> Upborne with indefatigable wings
> Over the vast abrupt ... ?
>
> (II 404–9)

Milton seems also to be addressing himself. 'Tempt' recalls what he is 'attempting', 'wandering' forlorn will be his dread in Book VII should his flight fail, while the dangers of darkness and the abyss are also those of his own creativity. (He suggests the perilous insubstantiality of the Chaos where he must go by replacing the nouns that one anticipates in the expressions 'the palpable obscure' and 'the vast abrupt' by further adjectives.) Satan's first actual view of Chaos is of

> a dark
> Illimitable ocean without bound,
> Without dimension; where length, breadth and highth,
> And time and place are lost; where eldest Night
> And Chaos, ancestors of Nature, hold
> Eternal anarchy ...
> ...
> For Hot, Cold, Moist, and Dry, four champions fierce,
> Strive here for mast'ry ...
> ...
> Light-armed or heavy, sharp, smooth, swift or slow ...
>
> (II 891–902)

Milton too will descend into this 'vast vacuity' (l. 932) where the idea of a world has fractured into mere lists of nouns and adjectives

(similar to the accumulation of nouns and names in Eliot's 'Gerontion'). Satan has foreseen its danger in his own speech to the council:

> ... the void profound
> Of unessential Night receives him next
> Wide gaping, and with utter loss of being
> Threatens him, plunged in that abortive gulf.
>
> (ll. 438–41)

As poet, Milton needs the 'dark materials' of Chaos, but he cannot rely, like God, on not being engulfed in them. Like Satan, he has reason to fear, in that strangely physical place, a metaphysical annihilation, a 'loss of being'. One probably knows little of this terror of being deprived of reality by the imagination (Milton was a contemporary of Pascal), but enough, perhaps, to see what he means, and to applaud, and fear, his meaning.

Milton journeys through Hell and Chaos, which gape open under the world since the Fall, in the company of Satan; he writes almost literally 'out of' a fallen world. He also encounters the 'barbarous dissonance' from which he will ask protection at the beginning of Book VII. As Satan approaches the throne of Chaos, suddenly

> a universal hubbub wild
> Of stunning sounds and voices all confused,
> Borne through the hollow dark, assaults his ear
> With loudest vehemence.
>
> (II 951–4)

He enters the 'noise' (l. 957), rather as a writer enters the anarchic sounds and voices that swarm around him and in his head. As if to make almost that point, Milton shows the noise of Chaos invading the earth with the destruction of the tower of Babel. When Michael relates this event to Adam in Book XII, Milton is careful to give him a vocabulary that tolls reminiscent bells, so that the 'jangling noise', the 'gabble' and the 'din' which replace 'native language' constitute likewise a 'hubbub' and a 'Confusion' (ll. 54–62). To write is to raise language from the chaos into which it has lapsed, with no certainty of being able, like God, to control 'Confusion' with a 'word' (III 708–10).

(That invasion of language by infection is enacted within the poem itself, as Christopher Ricks has shown in *Milton's Grand Style*. Has it also been noticed in the sequence of terms at the beginning of Book IX, 'distrust', 'Disloyal', 'disobedience' and 'distance', which prepares a pun on 'distaste' – God's distaste being a response to Eve's wrongful 'tasting' of the fruit – that a reference is being made to Pluto by his other name of Dis? Satan as ruler of the underworld, who is about to insinuate himself into the serpent, here insinuates himself, equally disguised, into the language, beginning, moreover, in the word 'discourse', so apparently harmless, so near to the bone.)

Hence the involvement of Milton's and Satan's voyage with 'art'. The word had additional meanings in the seventeenth century, but the contexts in which Milton places it certainly make one think of poetry and the other arts: when Beelzebub asks, in the speech about venturing into the void, 'what art can then / Suffice?' (II 410–11), we should assume, behind the 'guile' that he no doubt intends, the art that Milton will require as a poet negotiating Chaos. In Hell, the references to art are unflattering. The building of Pandemonium is the occasion for Milton to argue that the greatest monuments of human 'art' (I 696) are easily surpassed by the 'wondrous art' or technology of evil Spirits (l. 703). He seems mainly to be referring to pagan art, along with Roman Catholic and Stuart; is his own Puritan epic also being scathed, however? Is this Milton's way of acknowledging, soon after the beginning of his poem, that 'the poetry does not matter'? If so, the suggestion climaxes in the description of Mulciber, the designer of Pandemonium, which has caused some offence:

> Men called him Mulciber; and how he fell
> From heav'n, they fabled, thrown by angry Jove
> Sheer o'er the crystal battlements: from morn
> To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
> A summer's day; and with the setting sun
> Dropped from the zenith like a falling star,
> On Lemnos th'Aégean isle. Thus they relate,
> Erring ...
>
> (ll. 740–7)

Devastating prosodic wit at the expense of heathen fable? No doubt: but isn't Milton vulnerable as well? He does cause some alluring lines to flow into his poem only to dismiss them, but not exclusively

through a critique of beauty which is outside of the truth. In the course of his creative journey through Hell he shows an actual work of art being produced there, which has, like his poem, an author or 'architect' (l. 732), and the lines on Mulciber that follow are an example of his own art. By undermining them he is questioning his own as well as pagan poetry – reminding himself that the making of great art does not save from sin, since Mulciber 'fell', or from damnation, since Mulciber, the builder of towered structures in heaven, 'was headlong sent / With his industrious crew to build in hell' (ll. 750–1). That final and terrible irony, devised by a poet at the outset of a long poem, is of the kind to which, in our own day, the poetry of Geoffrey Hill can make one sensitive.

A rather different effect is created in the passage in Book IX where Michael shows Adam the first human artists, Jubal the player of harp and organ, and Tubal-cain the forger. Although they are taught by the Spirit of God (ll. 611–12), they also, as descendants of Cain, inherit their arts in effect from Hell, since the lines that describe them (558–73) are themselves an imitation of those describing Pandemonium. Michael duly denounces them, as practising the 'arts that polish life' while remaining 'Unmindful of their Maker' (ll. 610–11). If the reader looks back from the denunciation, however, to the lines on Jubal, he finds this:

> his volant touch
> Instinct through all proportions low and high
> Fled and pursued transverse the resonant fugue.
>
> (ll. 561–3)

Certainly, 'Fled' and 'fugue' relate Jubal to Cain the 'fugitive' (Genesis 4:12, 14); yet the marvellous subtlety of the writing is surely an attempt to redeem that fallen art? The player's volant or *flying* touch is perfect for the *flight* of the fugue; the tracking of the counterpoint is enacted consummately in a line that moves transverse from 'Fled' to 'fugue'; and the musical and mathematical world full of sense and yet also beyond the senses is present in the fact that it is not hands that strike stops and chords but a 'touch', and that what is fled and pursued is nothing more substantial than a fugue.

This triumphantly delicate writing seems to me a kind of preciosity, of the highest order. Something similar, though less

extravagant, is found in the course of Raphael's description of the Creation:

> the swan, with archèd neck
> Between her white wings mantling proudly, rows
> Her state with oary feet.
>
> (VII 438–40

As what is fled and pursued is a 'fugue', so what is rowed is a 'state'. Michael's summary of three of the plagues of Egypt, despite the quite different feeling in the lines, moves with a comparable and even more startling ease between the concrete and the abstract:

> Frogs, lice and flies must all his palace fill
> With loathed intrusion.
>
> (XII 177–8)

For there is another perspective on to art, and Milton's suspicion of art, derived from a Renaissance belief that it resulted from the Fall, is most clearly transformed in his description of Paradise. It is true that he delays that description until Book IV, by which time the reader has already experienced Hell and Chaos, and that he causes the reader to see Paradise through the eyes of Satan, as a means, presumably, of performing in the narrative the fact that we come to Paradise from a fallen world, and cannot look on it sinlessly; and it is also true that at one point he pulls himself short with the words, 'whereof here needs no account; / But rather to tell how, if art could tell ... ' (ll. 235–6). Only a few lines later, however, he describes nectar feeding

> Flow'rs worthy of Paradise, which not nice art
> In beds and curious knots, but Nature boon
> Poured forth profuse on hill and dale and plain ...
>
> (ll. 241–3)

He is reinforcing his argument by going beyond disparagement of the formal garden to the contrasting of all art which must obtain after the Fall with the work of artless prelapsarian Nature. Yet his

description of Paradise, here as throughout, is only possible through art, and it is a particularly 'nice' art, though a delicate rather than a fastidious one, which emphasises the copiousness of Nature by the (profuse) repetition of 'Poured' in the etymology of 'profuse'. The suggestion, perhaps, is that the art into which we have been forced by the Fall, and in which we engage under the eyes of Satan, can, by being consummately achieved, effect a change of sign, and become a means to reclaiming and transfiguring the world.

* * *

For Milton does, after all, emerge from Hell and Chaos, and one can say retrospectively of his journey that, with the aid of prayer, in the first book he descended into hell, in the third he rose again, he ascended into heaven. What he emerges with, among other things, is the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, and his poem will be his victory over the chaos and the noise that he has obliged himself to encounter. Moreover, the 'flight' into reaches of reality from which we are normally barred, the adventuring on things not yet attempted, is also an excelling of experience, a breaking-out of our condition. Milton exults in a dangerous but also superhuman passing of the limits, both downwards and upwards, and the voyaging poet becomes our representative in an escape from the Fall. Milton, in this perspective, is the hero of *Paradise Lost*. Like many other literary heroes he risks a great deal, and he clearly indicates the ambivalence of what he is about, but also like them he secures a victory over the confines of our world.

Johnson wrote of the poem that Milton's delight was not to 'paint things as they are' but 'to sport in the wide regions of possibility'. The distinction recalls that of Aristotle in chapter 9 of the *Poetics*, where the poet's function, as opposed to the historian's, is not 'to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of thing that might happen'.[4] Aristotle's 'might', however, only extends to what is psychologically 'probable or necessary' within an invented story, whereas Johnson's 'possibility' involves 'discovery', and the forming of 'new modes of existence', by the journeying 'into worlds where only imagination can travel'. One can go further, since Milton's concern is also the possibility of the fallen world in the sense of its capacity for recreation. Through his flight, in fact, he achieves something resembling the 'incorporeal speed' (VIII 37), the 'Speed almost spiritual' (110), that Raphael agrees may be attribut-

able to the heavenly bodies. Raphael's discussion of a problem in the Ptolemaic system yields expressions where the material is verging on the spiritual, and where one glimpses the possible raising of the one to the other. Milton can conceive such a raising because of his well known beliefs about the correspondence that already exists between earth and heaven. Earth is the 'shadow' of heaven, he has Raphael suggest, so that earthly things are 'like' the heavenly (V 575–6), in the same way, presumably, that Adam himself was created in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God (Genesis 1:26–7); and the Father's plan is that humans should rise by merit until 'earth be chang'd to heaven' (VII 160). That change is seen in Raphael's 'transubstantiation' of his meal (V 438), and is explained by the fact that in the chain of being everything is assigned its sphere, 'Till body up to spirit work, in bounds / Proportioned to each kind' (ll. 478–9). It will be achieved in the human realm, or so Raphael speculates, by the bodies of Adam and Eve turning at last 'all to spirit' (l. 497).

Milton himself is speculating here about the world before the Fall. But the idea of transubstantiating, of 'sublimating', of 'converting', and of 'turning' with which he scatters these verses, is just as relevant to our now fallen world, and far more urgent. For Milton believed not that the world would finally have to be destroyed so that disembodied spirits could go elsewhere, to heaven, but that a new earth, and also a new 'heaven' in the sense of visible universe, would be created in its place. In Book III, and no less than five times in the last three books, he quotes the main biblical text asserting the doctrine, 2 Peter 3: 10–13: '... the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.... Nevertheless we ... look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness'. So the original plan for an eventual changing of the earth into a spiritual heaven has not been abandoned, and Michael announces that the faithful will be received into bliss,

> Whether in heav'n or earth, for then the earth
> Shall all be Paradise, far happier place
> Than this of Eden, and far happier days.
>
> (XII 463–5)

Behind the whole of Milton's work one feels the pressure of that crucial oxymoron of St Paul's, his description in 1 Corinthians 15:44 of

'natural bodies' being transformed at the resurrection into 'spiritual bodies'.

Milton cannot effect that change, naturally, but he has certain means of suggesting it. He describes the earth itself, for instance, through the eyes of various figures in the poem who see it as 'new'. Of course for them it is new in the sense that it has just been created; but here as elsewhere Milton is surely making use of the fact that the reader is viewing an unfallen world from a fallen, to evoke the sudden beauty not only of the first earth but of our own corrupt earth when transformed. The emotive charge of such moments is a strange combination of nostalgia for a world now gone and excitement for a world yet to be. Hence the wonder when an angel declares:

> There is a place
> (If ancient and prophetic fame in heav'n
> Err not), another world, the happy seat
> Of some new race called man
>
> (II 345–8)

(where the parentheses suspend and isolate for consideration the phrase 'There is a place'); and when another pauses to view near heaven and 'hanging in a golden chain / This pendent world' (II 1051–2), or is overwhelmed in contemplation of an earth 'how like to heav'n', of a 'Terrestrial heav'n, danced round by other heav'ns' (IX 99, 103). The fact that the first angel is Beelzebub and the second Satan quietly stresses the darkness from which we are obliged to sight the new world.

Milton also adumbrates that world in a variety of ways through the language of the poem, and in particular through its inexhaustible naming. One of the exhilarations of his text is the profusion of synonyms or synonymous phrases to describe light, darkness, Hell, Chaos, Heaven, angels, Satan, the Father, the Son. The teeming linguistic creativity is exercised time and again, moreover, on 'an object that excels the sense' (VIII 456), on 'what surmounts the reach / Of human sense' (V 571–2). Isn't this Milton's attempt as a poet to recover in a fallen world the ability to name that was originally given to Adam? And by going ahead of sense to another kind of 'object', he takes his nominative language further than the world, he casts it beyond in a kind of recreative hyperbole.

His spiritual materialism, so to speak, is of importance beyond *Paradise Lost*, however remote it may seem from present concerns. It implies a shaping of experience, from Creation through Fall to Recreation, which seems to me true in all kinds of perspectives. Its stress on the need to renew this world rather than search for another provides for a literature at once mimetic and recreative, a literature neither of submission nor of evasion but of change. The poem ends, nevertheless, not in a world renewed but in the 'world of woe', which it describes relentlessly through the whole of the two final books. Milton's conclusion is not a triumphalist celebration of the *felix culpa*, the happy fault by which Adam has unwittingly prepared a better though far-off future for his race, but a manifestation of where that race still is. In the closing four lines, Adam and Eve are ushered into the world that we recognise and inhabit, and that the poet Milton inhabits too: a world of loss, futurity, choice, providence, human fellowship, uncertainty, solitude. In the closing word, by which the poem is also opened to the future, they are left in the 'way'. (*Paradise Lost* ends where Dante's *Commedia* begins). The poem is exemplary in that it explores, along with so much else, the problems of writing in a fallen world, and the power of poetry to work towards a renewal of that world; but it is exemplary too in that, while recounting the actual story of that fall and renewal, it places itself, truly and honestly, in the distance between Paradise lost and Paradise regained.

2

La Fontaine and the Subversion of Poetry

There is a line in La Fontaine's *Fables*: 'L'onde était transparente ainsi qu'aux plus beaux jours', which has often been commented on (notably by Odette de Mourgues)[1] for its beauty. It is also a bit of a joke. For us, sensitive readers of poetry that we are, and delicate appreciators of nature, the water attains that limpidity which we associate with the clearest, most perfect weathers. For the heron in the scene (the line is in 'Le Héron', Book VII, fable 4), the transparency of the water allows him to see the fish, and promises him another substantial catch like those he remembers from his best days' angling. The bird's prosaic gaze subverts the line throughout its length, reading into it another, gastronomic, meaning and altering most completely, and perhaps pointedly, the word 'beaux'.

A similar line occurs in 'Le Chêne et le Roseau' (I 22), when the oak describes reeds as growing 'Sur les humides bords des royaumes du vent'. Again, the muted magniloquence of the writing is prosaically troubled: behind the solemnity of the 'humides bords', the 'watery borders' – La Fontaine elsewhere calls the sea 'l'humide séjour', the 'watery abode' (X 14), as Ronsard had called it the 'plus humide espace' – is the oak's pitying distaste for the 'damp', the 'dank' edges of rivers and marshes.

From one point of view, the writing is recreative; it delivers a world still recognisable but also unforeseeably transformed. One might argue, in fact, that to recreate is a property of all language. Even outside poetry, water travels some way to reach the word 'water', or the word 'eau', crossing into a mental space and acquiring breath, body movement, sound. Yet the change is so familiar, and so apparently unimportant, that we have to be nudged into noticing it. 'Onde' is a very powerful nudge, a word that by its variability plays the river in the fable against all waters from wave to ocean, and that by its overtly poetic nature (it has no equivalent in English) poises the water somewhere between a river bed and artifice. Much the same happens to our recollections of favourite

weathers, of fine 'days' and 'daylights', when they too are named and yet also not named in 'les plus beaux jours'. The world has become 'transparent' and weightless; it has been renamed, not only by words but by the language where they interact, and lifted (the metaphor seems appropriate) into a new condition, which is both physical, since the body of the world and the human body are somehow present, and strangely not physical.

In the line spoken by the oak tree, the transforming and lifting are progressive. 'Humides', which is our world, becomes 'les humides bords', which is no longer quite the world as we know it, since 'bords' is another expressively inexpressive word, capable of subsuming any number of verges, margins and shores. The shores also become those not of fens or streams but of 'kingdoms'. In entering language the place has been eased of its habitual names; and the final touch – the king is the 'vent' – produces a wind which is neither a personification nor the wind of the everyday, and which blows in a realm of its own, that of the world re-imagined.

The writing in the *Fables* is, in fact, continually recreative. Of course, La Fontaine doesn't describe it in quite those terms: his vocabulary is actually more striking. He notes from the beginning, in the dedication of the first book, and repeatedly throughout, that he has re-conceived the world by granting to everything within it the possibility of language: 'Tout parle en mon ouvrage, et même les poissons', 'everything speaks in my work, even fish'. That language, moreover, is itself transformed, since it has taken on syllable count and, deepest of mysteries, rhyme: 'Sire loup, sire corbeau, / Chez moi se parlent en rime', 'Sir Wolf, Sir Crow, address each other here in rhyme' (VIII 13). There really is nothing trivial about this rhyming, as if it were merely the consequence of the animals occurring in poetry rather than prose; for verse, according to a suggestive commonplace of the time, is the language of the gods. The animals in conversation with each other achieve not only a superhuman elegance (our conversations being conducted without benefit of rhyme) but a 'divine' one. The distance covered is vast, though La Fontaine states it with his usual blandness: 'Le loup, en langue des dieux, / Parle au chien dans mes ouvrages', 'The wolf, in the language of the gods, speaks to the dog in my works' (IX 1).

He has wrought on the world what he describes as a 'spell', or rather, to adopt his defter way of suggesting the idea, what could be taken for a spell: 'Qui ne prendrait ceci pour un enchantement?' (II

1). The world trembles, clears, and is different. It has become the territory of 'feinte', or fiction (III 1, VI 1), which one enters by 'conte', 'récit', 'histoire' (*passim*). It may also be reached by 'exagérations' (note to XI 9), is hyperbolic without necessarily employing hyperbole, and is the domain, according to another and particularly strong way of designating it, of 'mensonge' or 'lie' (II 1). It possesses its own language, which according to the same fable is quite simply a 'new language', a 'language nouveau'.

At the same time, however, the writing reasserts a world and a language untransformed. It homes to a reality both quotidian and common. I don't mean low as opposed to elevated; it is not only when he considers such dignities as 'l'onde ... transparente' or the 'royaumes du vent' that La Fontaine uses his arts, or when, in the line 'Damoiselle belette, au corps long et flouet' (III 17), he clothes the young weazel of quality in a fashionable sequence of l's. The craft is also at work, though with different effects, when he deals with the existential and verbal populace, as in 'Le Chat et le Renard' (IX 14):

> C'était deux vrais tartufs, deux archipatelins,
> Deux francs patte-pelus qui, des frais du voyage,
> Croquant mainte volaille, escroquant maint fromage,
> S'indemnisaient à qui mieux mieux.

(*They were two real Tartuffes, two Arch-Pathelins, two arrant mealy-mouths, whose travelling expenses, by gobbling many a fowl, and snatching many a cheese, they vied with each other to recoup.*)

The two animals, as well as becoming literary twice over, are gathered into a rhetoric of accumulation and into an unfailing succession of cram-full syllables,of energetic and varied mouth movements. (Rabelais' French, as it were, after Racine's.) The verse also appears to be engendering itself: from 'vrais' and 'francs' it derives 'frais', from 'archipatelins' 'patte-pelus', and from 'croquant' 'escroquant'. (Here one may think of Queneau.) The passage mimes extravagantly and at high speed the way in which, in creation, words continually give rise to other words, through the mind's, mostly unobserved, pleasure in repeating sounds. It happens at every literary 'level': once Enobarbus has spoken of the 'burnish'd throne' of Cleopatra, for example, he is led on to say that it 'burn'd' on the water (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II ii 199–200). The process, as 'croquant' and 'escroquant' show, is linked to the pun; rhyme, by which 'voyage' supplies 'fromage', is its formalisation.

No: what I am thinking of are certain moments when he suddenly refocuses on (what seems) a plain world and a plain language, as in this incident concerning a fox (XI 6):

Un soir il aperçut
La lune au fond d'un puits: l'orbiculaire image
Lui parut un ample fromage.

(*One evening he perceived the moon at the bottom of a well: the orbicular image seemed to him to be an ample cheese.*)

Having gone one better, or several better, than 'image ronde' by calling the moon's reflection 'orbiculaire', La Fontaine replaces the silvery refinement with a camembert. On this occasion, it is true, 'ample' maintains the more stylish approach; and the next two lines:

Deux seaux alternativement
Puisaient le liquide élément

(*Two buckets alternately would draw the liquid element*)

sublimate the willing and acting of the potential users of the buckets, along with the water they fetch, into a kind of near-abstract geometry, circumlocution and polysyllabic elegance.

The procedure is more pointed when the descent to the ordinary involves repetition. After saying of two well-born she-goats who decline to yield on a narrow bridge: 'Faute de reculer, leur chute fut commune', 'For want of withdrawing, their drop was mutual', he says it again without the distingué phrasing and without the u's: 'Toutes deux tombèrent dans l'eau', 'Both fell into the water' (XII 4). He may even point to the fact that he is repeating, as in 'Le cierge' (IX 12):

Quand on eut des palais de ces filles du ciel
Enlevé l'ambroisie en leurs chambres enclose,
Ou, pour dire en français la chose,
Après que les ruches sans miel
N'eurent plus que la cire ...

(*When, from the palaces of these daughters of heaven, they had removed the ambrosia enclosed in their chambers, or, to put it in French, after the hives without honey had only wax ...*)

That shift into 'French' is, I take it, extremely important, despite the unconcerned gaiety with which ,when poetry is in question, La Fontaine generally conceals what matters to him. His writing renews the world as it renews language; in these few lines, 'filles du ciel' is doubly transfigurative, since it names the bees both as daughters of heaven – they come from the 'séjour des dieux', the 'abode of the gods' – and as daughters of the sky. (A fly in another poem is 'la fille de l'air'. An English poet might envy the way in which gender peoples the world.) Yet the world which La Fontaine desires is not another world but this one, changed, and the language he desires is not a foreign language but his own become different. If he is drawn to imagination, he also delights in perception; if he glimpses language in a new condition, he also takes purchase on the splendour that already exists in mere French. The dialectic, I believe, is exemplary. Though because of the nature of writing, even what he advances as honest French has been arranged, and when it passes through the mouth and ear – 'Après que les ruches sans miel / N'eurent plus que la cire, on fit mainte bougie' – it too renders the reader astonishingly eloquent.

Strictly speaking, reality and language (if they can be separated) are not to be found in an objective state independent of ourselves which we may choose either to observe or to alter, since what we know is what we 'half-create'. Yet we do feel the pull of what is beyond us, surely, and we sense that experience comes to us day by day and is shared with others. We realise too that a certain high-handed processing of the real can produce an intransitive poetry, an autonomous, though maybe dazzling, nowhere and no-speech, powerless to reach back into that daily communion. A writer, therefore, may well feel a tension at the very heart of writing, between the possibility and need of working the material of the world, in keeping with the nature of consciousness and of language, and the summons to be faithful to 'what is there', to defer to an otherness. In the epilogue to Book XI, La Fontaine defers, profoundly and, for a writer, most movingly. After a further claim to have translated 'en langue des dieux / Tout ce que disent sous les cieux / Tant d'êtres empruntant la voix de la nature', 'into the language of the gods all that so many creatures say under the heavens by availing themselves of the voice of nature', he continues, as a first step: 'Car tout parle dans l'univers; / Il n'est rien qui n'ait son langage', 'For everything speaks in the universe; there is nothing which does not have its own language'. The context

here is really quite heavy, since allusion is presumably being made to 1 Corinthians 14:10 as rendered (and seemingly misrendered) in the Vulgate: 'Tam multa, ut puta, genera linguarum sunt in hoc mundo: et nihil sine voce est'. Then, having acknowledged in this way that, prior to his poetry, languages are already in the world, among non-human creatures as well as men, he wonders, only half-humorously and in a line that arrives out of the blue, whether that the 'peoples' that he introduces into poetry may not be,

Plus éloquents chez eux qu'ils ne sont dans mes vers ...

(*More eloquent in their own speech than they are in my verses.*)

To see La Fontaine's poetry as recreative may allow one to understand him rather better when, along with his contemporaries, he writes of poetry as an addition. He presents himself in the preface as 'putting' the fables of others 'into verse', tells the Dauphin in the dedication that to Aesop's Fables he has 'ajouté les ornements de la poésie', 'added the ornaments of poetry', and mentions, again in the preface, that Socrates also thought it appropriate to 'les habiller des livrées des Muses', to 'dress them in the livery of the Muses'. We have inherited such a long and sustained rejection of this language and of the way of thinking which it implies that we not only find it impossible, I fancy, to conceive that our own way of thinking could be wrong, but we cannot really get into the mind of someone who thinks like La Fontaine. I am not suggesting, in fact, that La Fontaine is 'right', but that when he adopts what were then the commonplaces of literary theory he means by them something precise and pertinent. He sees poetry, in my terms, as transforming or renewing language and the world, or in his terms as turning them into verse, as ornamenting them, as attiring them in the Muses' colours. His metaphors (which derive, as it happens, from what has been by far the most common view of the matter throughout the history of writing about writing) are perfectly adequate to a recreative theory, and even suggest such a theory: they quite pointedly indicate that things are going to be better apparelled inside verse than outside.

The actual elaboration of the verse, moreover, tends towards the additional, the extra – indeed, towards the superfluous. That would seem paradoxical, given one's sense of the poems' pace and coherence. Consider again, however, the oak's line about the

kingdoms of the wind: it is irrelevant to the oak's approach to the reed, and its eloquence emerges from a sudden and 'unnecessary' forgetting of self. Similarly, this is how a frog begins to complain to another frog (II 4) that the loser in a contest between two bulls will come to their waters and create havoc:

> – Eh! ne voyez-vous pas, dit-elle,
> Que la fin de cette querelle
> Sera l'exil de l'un; que l'autre, le chassant,
> Le fera renoncer aux campagnes fleuries?
> Il ne régnera plus sur l'herbe des prairies ...

(*'Ah! do you not see', she said, 'that the end of this quarrel will be exile for one of them; that the other, casting him out, will oblige him to renounce the flowery fields? He will no longer reign over the grass of the meadows ...'*)

Not only is there the same unnecessary and eccentric lyricism, and the same spacious pause in the narrative, but the last line quoted contains almost a paraphrase of the previous line. There is again a pause, this time by the narrator – again an absorbed, unhurried contemplation – when in a later fable (II 14) some other poetical frogs are disturbed by a hare:

> Grenouilles aussitôt de sauter dans les ondes;
> Grenouilles de rentrer en leurs grottes profondes.

(*The frogs they jump immediately into the waters; the frogs they return into their plunging grottoes.*)

Naturally, none of these passages is merely incidental decoration: they serve a creative necessity of their own, working in the total poem by providing it with an extra dimension. They are generated, nevertheless, by an aesthetic of superfluity, which also gives rise to periphrasis. It is by periphrasis that La Fontaine calls expanses of water the 'royaumes du vent', water in general 'le liquide élément', the sea 'l'humide séjour' or bees 'les filles du ciel'. One thinks, inevitably, of French preciosity, and might reflect that preciosity too, however ultimately uninteresting, saw poetry as recreative, if only, where periphrasis was concerned, by a kind of fixed nomination (a mirror, for instance, was 'le conseiller des grâces', 'the counsellor of charms') which displaces the world, or

certain of its commodities, into an artifice pure but inert. La Fontaine's artifice, on the contrary, is always changing, is continually suggestive and teems with reality. He names and renames, slowing for momentary intensities of concentration and transmutation, dressing the world in the unnecessary, and using more syllables than he need (XI 10) to designate the simplest things:

> Les reines des étangs, grenouilles veux-je dire
> (Car que coûte-t-il d'appeler
> Les choses par noms honorables?)

(*The queens of pools, frogs I mean [for what does it cost to call things by honourable names?]*)

What indeed? To call frogs by an honourable name is merely to invest them with poetry, that is, language become redundant, circumlocutory, gratuitous.

On the other hand, a frog is, as they say, a frog, and it also needs protecting from poetry. Hence the importance of the two alexandrines with which we began. They reaffirm the common – specifically, the positive and negative spontaneities of the body – through burlesque. Beneath the transparency of the day is the heron's hunger; beneath the realms of the wind is the oak's disgust.

This relates partly to the underlying mock-heroic project of the *Fables*, which eventually became a work beginning 'Je chante les héros ...', 'I sing of heroes ...', and having, although they were not numbered in that way by La Fontaine himself, twelve books like the *Aeneid*. Not, parenthetically, that mock-heroic is always simple in the *Fables*. In 'Le Chêne et le Roseau', the oak is mocked for seeing itself at the heroic level and for adopting a suitable idiom; yet it is allowed the line about the kingdoms of the wind which, in its 'serious' reading, is genuinely epic, and even represents a moment of self-effacement, in which, furthermore, the oak is disinterestedly contemplating what belongs to its enemy. Above all, the ending decisively reverses what we have assumed by then to be the relation between the oak and the reed. The reed may be right (though no moral, interestingly, is extracted from the fable), but the poem is about the oak. The concluding quotation from Virgil, describing the oak, for once without derision, as 'Celui de qui la tête au ciel était voisine,/Et dont les pieds touchaient à l'empire des morts', 'He whose head was neighbour to the sky, and whose feet touched the

empire of the dead', removes the poem's mock epic, which has been at the tree's expense, and establishes, in its favour, the epic *tout court*. One might notice in passing that epic hyperbole (the oak's head as 'near heaven'), devised when the imagination is attentive to truth, is not less but more extravagant than the hyperbole of mock epic (the oak had only considered its forehead to be 'like the Caucasus'); which is, after all, how it should be. The oak at the moment of death, therefore, is not a mock hero but a hero, and he is even associated with Aeneas, since it is to Aeneas that Virgil's original lines on the oak tree (*Aeneid*, IV 444–5) refer by way of comparison. Indeed, the oak which resists – silently now, and on La Fontaine's part laconically: 'L'arbre tient bon', 'The tree stands firm' – and which is destroyed, as well as being an epic hero and a certain type of tragic hero, seems to be man himself, spanning the worlds, rising by godlike intelligence and aspiration yet drawn downward by his involvement with death. Even the anthropomorphisms are more insisted on here than in La Fontaine's sources. Whatever the manner in which most of the fable is told, its approach to values is devious and complex, and its theme remarkably weighty. It is a powerful instance, though a small one, in keeping with La Fontaine's way of doing things, of that difficult, disturbing kind of text which is both mock-heroic and heroic, large-scale examples of which would be *The Dunciad* and *The Waste Land*.

From another perspective, the two alexandrines are also a mockery of the reader. La Fontaine offers them and, when we have abandoned ourselves, withdraws them, to reveal other lines in their place. They are even unsayable, not simply, as is often if not usually the case with poetry, because of a wealth of moves that no single reading could track, but because, each line consisting of two contradictory lines inhabiting the same words, the reader is obliged to exclude one of the appropriate tones of voice.

They are above all a mockery of poetry, where the mockery works from inside. The poetry is not delivered and then, in subsequent lines, subverted: the poetry and the subversion accompany each other syllable by syllable. What is even more arresting, however, is the fact that La Fontaine takes liberties with his writing at the moment of its greatest achievement. These are not merely good lines. Their diction, the relating and modifying of their words, the world they rouse, the sounds they place and vary – this is La Fontaine at his most consummate, and the qualities here are those we associate with the very best poetry of the period. It is when

writing at the utmost edge of his demands for his poetry that he also wants to joke. Having reached perfection, he puns.

La Fontaine transfigures the world and mocks the transfiguration with indecorous appetite or clammy fens, raises language above itself and puts it down by returning it to a common expressiveness; and he does so while using the one set of words. It is, clearly, a form of wit, of the wit that Eliot, in the course of his Marvell essay, indicated in 'Lafontaine', and that La Fontaine, in his preface and in 'Le Pouvoir des Fables', 'The Power of Fables' (VIII 4), may, reciprocally, have helped Eliot to define. 'Un certain charme, un air agréable qu'on peut donner à toutes sortes de sujets, même les plus sérieux', 'a certain charm, an agreeable air that one can give to all manner of subjects, even the most serious', could well prompt an 'alliance of levity and seriousness', while 'grâces légères', 'slight graces', and 'ces badineries ... dans le fond ... portent un sens très solide', 'these trifles ... underneath ... carry a most solid meaning', are not far from the 'tough reasonableness' which lies 'beneath the slight lyric grace'. Here, however, the wit has become more radical. It engages with the fundamental possibility of poetry, with the recreation, or not, of language and the world. Yet the disturbing of the poetry doesn't leave it with the *fêlure*, the *faille*, the 'fracture' or 'fault', that a poet might intend now: the 'beautiful' version of each line remains intact and may still be read. There seems no disquiet about poetry, no pulling back from a writing seen as too ordered for our disorder, too good to be true. On the contrary: when the joking intervenes, at the moment of maximum power, it doesn't damage the perfection, it passes beyond it. The writing achieves itself and then self-delightingly over-achieves.

To mock perfection while accomplishing it is, after all, the final enactment of mastery. It also denotes a particularly desirable kind of freedom, beyond the disciplines that creativity wills: a freedom which is irregular, or in Freudian terms, uncensored, and which therefore naturally expresses itself in play. So La Fontaine, with a last flourish, subverts the subversion. His burlesque vindicates our world and our speech, prior to writing; but at the same time, in mocking poetry it produces more poetry, and as it derides it celebrates.

3

A Meaning for Mock-Heroic

For anyone concerned for the relations of poetry to the 'real' world, and with the power of poetry to transform the real, mock-heroic is, in fact, of special interest. By its very nature it indicates a discrepancy between reality on the one hand and, on the other, poetry, language, art; or rather, it announces that reality is being changed by art. By emphasising its means, by calling attention, that is, to its choice of event, of verse level, of vocabulary, to each of the moves by which it mimes the epic, it declares itself to be art and revels in the fact. True: since its aim is partly satiric, it will show, in one perspective, that the reality selected for the poem is unworthy of the artistry bestowed on it; yet, from another perspective, the positive transformation of that unworthy real is the process by which the poetry redeems as well as judges – the process, one might say, in which the poetry functions most inwardly as poetry.

In this light, Boileau's *Le Lutrin* and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* are particularly suggestive. Not only are they prime examples, related to each other through Pope's use of Boileau and yet at the same time distinct, but they are also based on real events in the everyday sense of the word, unlike Dryden's *MacFlecknoe*, and so are occupied in a quite literal way with changing the real. They are literary in that they manoeuvre into themselves a host of previous works, of Virgil, Homer, Ovid, Corneille, Racine, Chapelain, Scudéry; of Dryden, Milton, Sedley, Cowley, the Earl of Dorset, and so forth. They are literary also in the ways in which this sustained textual and intertextual activity impinges on the world over which it hovers, the strife about the placing of a lectern or the cutting of a lock of hair. They are also expressly 'trivial', and it is just the triviality of their matter that enables them, in this high or ascensional burlesque, to display and to apply their incongruous art. (This is what mainly distinguishes them from the low burlesque of a work such as Scarron's *Virgil Travestied*: since his matter is heroic and his language trivial, the possibility of raising the world in poetry is not

available to him, at least in theory.) That disproportion is so evident, however, and the fact that the poets are inviting one to attend to it seems so obvious, that we can easily take it for granted, and so miss the deep bearing of the works, to be a changing of the world and a celebration of that change, as of the writing that achieves it.

I should like to move slowly into this rather large subject, by considering, first, certain details of *Le Lutrin*. I am aware that Boileau's tale of the rivalry of two clans within the clergy of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, and of the stratagem of the Treasurer's men to quell the Precentor by setting up a massive lectern in front of his stall, is a work read by few non-French speakers, and that outside France Boileau as a whole has become almost invisible. The reader will have to decide whether or not I am right in believing that there are still strong reasons for being interested in him. In Canto 1, Discord's visit to the Treasurer in his bed gives rise to the following:

> Dans le réduit obscur d'une alcôve enfoncée,
> S'élève un lit de plume à grands frais amassée.
> Quatre rideaux pompeux, par un double contour,
> En défendent l'entrée à la clarté du jour.
> Là, parmi les douceurs d'un tranquille silence,
> Règne sur le duvet une heureuse Indolence.
>
> (ll. 57–62)

(*In the dark recesses of a yawning alcove, rises a feather bed heaped up at great cost. Four solemn curtains, in a double row, forbid entry to the light of day. There, amid the comforts of a tranquil silence, reigns on the eider-down a contented Indolence.*)

The alcove is based on Virgil's cavern of Cacus (*Aeneid*, VIII 193), and its description acquires from the presence of an epic model its pausing wonder and its mock magniloquence, but also its ability to see anew. In the last line quoted, the abstraction that runs from 'Règne' to 'Indolence' (given flesh by being qualified as 'heureuse') touches concreteness lightly in 'duvet', and places the scene at once in the usual world and in a world become other; as do the not quite tangible 'douceurs' which, nevertheless, are not entirely mental through being in the plural, and as does the hint of

personification in 'Indolence', strengthened by its association with 'Règne'. The strangeness of the writing can be seen by contrast with Pope's (in this case) almost straightforward '*Belinda* still her downy Pillow prest'.[1] The stimulus to creativity from the need for an epic imagining has led Boileau to the transfiguration of a common bedroom.

Syntax is also refashioning the world, in the inversion, and in the withholding of the subject of the sentence until the end of the couplet. It is arguable that verse, by virtue of the 'unnatural' word orders and the dense patterning that it permits and indeed encourages (which give back, incidentally, to French, as to English, something of the suppleness, the variability, of Latin), always gathers the world into a process of transformation, by working reality in newly-worked language forms. It is even arguable that most 'natural' syntax already operates change, and therefore that to change syntax itself, in the opportunity of verse, is to underline and to exhibit that change. Clearly, the artifices of prosody are anything but exclusive to mock-heroic; yet their recreativity is particularly appropriate to a literary kind which emphasises its recreative ambition.[2]

There are many other ways in which a mock-heroic regarding of an object changes it. On the departure of the Treasurer's men from the law court, or Den of Cavil, it is said: 'Sous leurs pas diligents le chemin disparaît, / Et le pilier loin d'eux déjà baisse et décroît' (V 91–2), 'Under their diligent steps the way disappears, and the pillar far behind them already sinks and diminishes'. Although the heroic poem behind these lines is being mocked in the ordinary sense of ridiculed (it is Chapelain's *La Pucelle*, the favourite butt for seventeenth-century wits), Boileau has used the rewriting of a garrulous account of the town of Chinon sinking, declining, withdrawing, fading, blurring and vanishing, to focus on objects in such a way as to depersonalise the action and to hint at an autonomous world unaware of the human: it is the pillar that diminishes and the way that disappears, and that does so not quite under the clerics' feet but under their steps. Pope focuses similarly at the beginning of the *Rape*, in lines that have been altered for the definitive version partly to make the point more clear: 'Thrice rung the Bell, the Slipper knock'd the Ground, / And the press'd Watch return'd a silver Sound' (I 17–18).

An object may also be transformed into something decidedly bizarre. Night observes the same champions in an earlier canto journeying towards their exploit of placing the lectern, and in

particular the barber who, with a light hand, 'Tient un verre de vin qui rit dans la fougère' (III 29–30). The enchantment of the line, where the barber seems to be holding a glass of wine that laughs in the fern, is only partly dispelled by the discovery that a *verre de fougère* in Boileau's time was a kind of glass; especially when one further discovers that Brossette thought it necessary to explain the word in his edition of Boileau's works published only five years after the latter's death. The expression, particularly the synecdochic form in which Boileau presents it, would seemingly have surprised even in its early readings. Once again, Pope also creates a similar effect, in the familiar line about fallen china vessels that 'In glittring Dust and painted Fragments lie' (III 160). He transforms bits of broken porcelain by a sudden close-up of attention, and by the vertiginously opposite implication of heroic falls and ruins. The transformation in Boileau is heightened by the fact that it is not poet and reader who see the small and unexpectedly vivid, laughing wine but the goddess Night, who, to that end, 'looks down' (l. 27).

This epic perspective, this concentration of the extraordinary on the ordinary with the accompanying expansion of the ordinary to heroic proportions, often establishes the objects of its notice in a world that is mysteriously larger than ours. Consider what happens to the lectern in Sidrac's address to the Treasurer:

> Entends-moi donc, Prélat. Dès que l'ombre tranquille
> Viendra d'un crêpe noir envelopper la ville,
> Il faut que trois de nous, sans tumulte, et sans bruit,
> Partent à la faveur de la naissante nuit,
> Et du lutrin rompu réunissant la masse,
> Aillent d'un zèle adroit le remettre en sa place.
>
> (I 177–82)

(*Hear me, Prelate. As soon as still darkness comes with black crape to envelop the town, three of us, without hubbub and soundlessly, must depart under cover of the new-born night, and, of the broken lectern regathering the mass, must go with skilful zeal and restore it to its place.*)

The epic notations of 'l'ombre tranquille', 'crêpe noir', 'la naissante nuit', transform the action of bringing together the pieces of a damaged reading desk, as if it were to occur in a world of more ample measures than our own, and as if a 'lutrin' were something

other than an everyday lectern. The apparent gravity of the event slows one's reading of the penultimate line, so that the eloquence of its u's and r's is brought to bear, and each word seems wondrous with designation. One remembers another well known line in the *Rape*, where the pouring of coffee into coffee cups is also transfigured, in this case by overt hyperbole, in the rendering: 'While *China*'s Earth receives the smoking Tyde' (III 110); and one notes again the effect of a simple inversion, which, while prefiguring the temporal order of the repair, endows the word 'masse' with a new grandeur at the end of the phrase and of the line.

A similar heightening occurs when, after a speech by the Precentor concluded in the epic manner, the Verger removes a summoning rattle from a cupboard: 'Il dit. Du fond poudreux d'une armoire sacrée / Par les mains de Girot la crécelle est tirée'; 'He spoke. From the dust-filled depths of a holy cupboard, by the hands of Girot the rattle is withdrawn' (IV 129–30). The numinous quality of the object is augmented by the inversion which tremblingly delays its naming, and by the transposition into the passive. The most arresting instance, however, is this:

> Des veines d'un caillou, qu'il frappe au même instant,
> Il fait jaillir un feu qui pétille en sortant:
> Et bientôt, au brasier d'une mèche enflammée,
> Montre, à l'aide du soufre, une cire allumée.
> Cet Astre tremblotant, dont le jour les conduit,
> Est pour eux un Soleil au milieu de la nuit.
>
> (III 51–6)

(*From the veins of a flint, which he strikes forthwith, he makes a spark fly that scintillates as it comes; and soon, to the fire of a blazing wick, he presents, with the aid of sulphur, a lighted candle. That quivering Star, whose light guides them, is for them a Sun in the middle of the night.*)

A member of the Treasurer's retinue strikes a light as they enter the chapel to prosecute their deed, in a passage imitated from the *Aeneid* (I 174–6) and also from the first *Georgic* (l. 135). His every gesture is detailed in a succession of close magnifications followed by a surging opening-out to the sun and to the night. The point of this outrageous scrutiny can easily be missed: in his *Histoire de la littérature française*, the nineteenth-century critic Nisard, troubled

in *Le Lutrin* by 'the disproportion between the richness of the art and the poverty of the subject matter', regretted that Boileau should have toiled to describe a lectern, to parody Dido's lament, and to 'light a candle poetically', while French school editions seem to agree among themselves that the lines are an 'awkward construction'. And even though we may be aware that it is precisely the disproportion and the puzzle that interest us, we are not necessarily happy with the figure which governs this kind of writing, and which I noted in La Fontaine, namely periphrasis.

Boileau evokes a form of periphrasis, without using the term itself, in passages that have been found unsatisfactory. In the eleventh *Epistle*, he suggests that his gardener would feel less overworked in comparison if he spent a couple of days labouring at a piece of verse,

> Qui dît sans s'avilir les plus petites choses,
> Fît des plus secs chardons des oeillets et des roses,
> Et sût même au discours de la rusticité
> Donner de l'élégance et de la dignité.
>
> (ll. 49–52)

(*which said, without debasing itself, the littlest things, made, of the dryest thistles, carnations and roses, and was able, even to the discourse of rusticity, to furnish elegance and dignity.*)

In a complementary text of about the same time, a letter to François Maucroix of 29 April 1695, he writes of the poet Racan: 'He excels above all, I believe, in saying little things .... The more the subject matter is dry and difficult to say in verse, the more striking it is when said nobly and with that elegance which properly constitutes poetry.' He is not thinking along these lines merely because, in the former instance, he is applying a suitable commonplace about pastoral, and in the latter is considering an individual poet. He also says of Racan's particular gift: 'it is in this that he most resembles the writers of antiquity, whom I admire above all for this skill'. We shall return to this surprising notion of admiring classical writers (he mentions Virgil, Horace and Homer) *above all* for their ability to endow small things with eloquence.

One might well be suspicious of this raising of 'dry' matters into 'elegance' and into 'dignity' or 'nobility', as being no more than the making of prestigious palaver out of a failure to experience reality to

the full. Certainly, the examples from his own verse that he quotes in the letter so as to carry through his point about Racan are somewhat startling. He is gratified at having found this way of referring, in the first *Epistle*, to the King's establishment of the manufacture of French lace to discourage the importation of lace from Venice: 'Et nos voisins frustrés de ces tributs serviles / Que payait à leur art le luxe de nos villes', 'And our neighbours frustrated of those servile tributes which the luxury of our towns paid to their art.' It is difficult to believe, as Boileau claims, that this was the couplet which La Fontaine most valued in his work, short of concluding that their taste was, simply, not ours, or that part at least of what pleased them in this making of international competition and trade worthy of the language of the gods, and this unremitting transposition of the facts into a realm of mental essences, was precisely its extravagance, its going over the top. This is certainly a way of reading the second passage that he quotes, an early version of lines from his recent *Epistle X*:

> Mais aujourd'hui qu'enfin la vieillesse venue,
> Sous mes faux cheveux blonds déjà toute chenue,
> A jeté sur ma tête, avec ses doigts pesants,
> Onze lustres complets surchargés de deux ans ...

(*But today, when old age, arrived at last, and already quite hoary under my false blond hair, has cast upon my head with its heavy fingers eleven lustra complete and burdened with two further years ...*)

It is a verse letter, he says, full of 'petites choses', and he presents the lines as a classic periphrasis, 'a passage which says nothing other than that, now I am fifty-seven years old, I must no longer lay claim to public approval'. Perhaps one ought, again, to disapprove of this ingenuity. Yet isn't there a kind of writer's self-mockery here? – an eyeing of the reader, a suggestion that he might notice and take pleasure in this roundabout rhetoric, this disinclination to name directly, this quite deliberate over-emphasis. Boileau comments, indeed: 'I think that I have hit off the wig [literally, as with a catapult] pretty well', as if the writing, far from being solemn, intended to strike its objects with verbal projectiles in a spirit of comedy. (Of course, he may also be successfully failing to state his topic because it is too painful, his emotion at ageing expressing itself

in sustained non-involvement. There are, as one knows, many different motives for periphrasis.)

What I am concerned with, in any case, in *Le Lutrin* is periphrasis both in a strict and in an extended sense of the term. The writing seems to practise the wide theory of the figure found in the treatise *On the Sublime*, once attributed to Longinus, which Boileau translated, and which he may even have been working on at the same time as his mock-epic.[3] In the splendid Chapter 24 (Chapters 28 and 29 in modern editions), Boileau has Longinus offer the following description of the figure: 'comme dans la musique le son principal devient plus agréable à l'oreille lorsqu'il est accompagné des différentes parties qui lui répondent; de même la périphrase tournant à l'entour du mot propre, forme souvent, par rapport avec lui, une consonance et une harmonie fort belle dans le discours', 'as in music the principal sound becomes more agreeable to the ear when it is accompanied by the different parts that respond to it, so periphrasis, turning around the plain word, often forms, with respect to it, a consonance and most beautiful harmony in the discourse'; and he renders a comment on Plato like this: 'par le moyen de cette périphrase mélodieusement répandue dans le discours, d'une diction toute simple, il a fait une espèce de concert et d'harmonie', 'by means of this periphrasis melodiously spread abroad in the discourse, from an utterly simple diction he has made a kind of concert and harmony'. This is a surely irresistible advocacy of periphrasis, as a 'responding' to the plain expression or the plain thing; as a travelling between the direct perception of an object or an event and other ways of seeing and naming it; as a turning around it so as to call out its harmonics, and gather language and the world into a kind of concert. It is also an accurate way of describing just those effects that I have been considering in *Le Lutrin*. Boileau's sense, moreover, of the pervasive power of the figure, and, seemingly, of its ability to extend beyond periphrasis as strictly defined, led him to reverse, and more than reverse, Longinus's warning, translated in the Loeb edition as 'However, it is a risky business, periphrasis, more so than any of the other figures', into this surprising and suggestive affirmation: 'Au reste il n'y a rien dont l'usage s'étende plus loin que la périphrase', 'Besides, there is nothing whose use extends further than periphrasis'.

In fact, Boileau 'changed' the other passages that I quoted, and made them his own. One looks in vain, in modern versions likely to be consulted by virtue of their authority or their cheapness, for the

qualities of this alive and recreative rendering, by a working poet, still capable, I presume, of attracting and orientating critic and writer alike.[4] The *Traité du Sublime*, which appeared along with *Le Lutrin* and *L'Art poétique* in what was, from a publishing point of view, Boileau's *annus mirabilis* of 1674, was the first French translation of Longinus, and may still be the best translation.

His wider reading of periphrasis shows again in the eighth of his *Critical Reflections on Some Passages of the Rhetor Longinus*, published in 1694 and so more or less contemporaneous with his thinking about 'petites choses'. In the course of an argument with Charles Perrault, he offers this prose translation of the opening of Pindar's first Olympian Ode:

> Il n'y a rien de si excellent que l'eau. Il n'y a rien de plus éclatant que l'or et il se distingue entre toutes les autres superbes richesses comme un feu qui brille dans la nuit. Mais, ô mon esprit, puisque c'est des combats que tu veux chanter, ne va point te figurer, ni que dans les vastes déserts du ciel, quand il fait jour, on puisse voir quelque autre astre aussi lumineux que le soleil; ni que sur la terre nous puissions dire, qu'il y ait quelque autre combat, aussi excellent que le combat Olympique.

(*There is nothing as excellent as water. There is nothing more dazzling than gold and it stands out among all other superb riches like a fire shining in the night. But, oh my soul, since it is of contests that you wish to sing, do not imagine either that in the vast deserts of the sky, when it is day, one can see any other heavenly body as luminous as the sun, or that on earth we can say that there is any other contest as excellent as the Olympic.*)

He comments wonderingly on the flow of great images and sublime figures, and exclaims: 'Quel tour et quelle agréable circonduction de paroles!', 'What a turn of phrase and what an agreeable circumduction of words!' 'Circonduction' is a term that he seems to have coined. Rather than 'period', the sense proposed by French critical editions, doesn't the word mean a leading around, having been formed quite regularly from Latin? – like the English 'circumduction', in fact, one of whose meanings, which the *OED* suspects may be obsolete, is 'the action of leading round or about; a roundabout or circuitous course'. It recalls *circumlocutio*, and also Quintilian's definition of periphrasis as *circuitus quidam eloquendi*, a kind of circuit of speaking.[5] A 'leading around of words' is another

fine way to describe a poetic strategy for the transforming of perception and the transmuting of thought, and to characterise the procedures of *Le Lutrin*.

What most attracts Boileau in Pindar's ode is the expression, 'les vastes déserts du ciel, quand il fait jour', which he considers 'perhaps one of the greatest things ever to have been said in poetry'. He continues: 'For who has not observed with what an infinite number of stars the sky seems to be peopled during the night; and what a vast solitude it is on the contrary the moment the sun shows itself?' Curiously, it seems to be once again Boileau himself who has produced the effect, despite his disclaimer about the 'dryness' of a translation made 'almost word for word' and 'so literal'. The Loeb version reads: 'look not by day for any star in the lonely sky, that shineth with warmth more genial than the sun'. Boileau's is the suggestion, not merely that the sky is deserted during the day, but that one *discovers* that vast desert at the disappearance of the stars. And it is not only a question of language (though rarely can a comma have been so well used): what comes home to the reader is a fresh vision of the visible universe, alive with implication. The redeployment of the real in circuits of eloquence leads not to another world but to the same world newly seen. Boileau even directs attention to the fact: 'who has not observed ... ?'

Another 'vast solitude' had occurred in the lines following the lighting of the candle in the third canto of *Le Lutrin*, which describe how the intrepid ecclesiastics 'passent de la nef la vaste solitude'. Here too the expression is a 'realistic' perceiving of the vastness and solitude of a large nave beyond the flickering light of a candle, with the *frisson* of epic measure entering by way not of contrast but of corroboration. What is remarkable on this occasion is that the penetration of the newly apprehended real follows immediately after an extravagant, circuitous, mutation of the real.

* * *

I have been discussing periphrastic effects in small pieces of writing. But isn't it also true that mock-heroic in itself, in its basic strategy, is a form of periphrasis? It takes a trifle and leads large words around it, over and again, in a never-ceasing refusal to name directly, to call a spade a spade or the shifting of a lectern the shifting of a lectern, the clipping of a lock the clipping of a lock. It seizes an unlikely world (in the first preface to *Le Lutrin*, Boileau describes the incident

on which it is based as a 'trifle' and a 'matter for jest') in the continuity of its inflationary and circumlocutional language, so as to recreate it in comedy and in a new dimension. In a way Boileau is also right to declare, in both prefaces, that his poem is itself a 'trifle' and a 'jest'; yet mock-heroic, by changing the real, in its everyday appearance, by phrasing around it while directing attention to the language into which the everyday is being drawn, enacts with deceptive self-mockery what is arguably the fundamental performance of writing.

It causes one to return yet again to a questioning of the notion of literary 'seriousness'. It also illuminates rhetoric. According to the classical understanding, rhetoric is the opening of a distance between the figured and the 'ordinary' term (between, say, *flame* and *love*) and, by implication, the opening of a distance between figured language and reality. Mock-heroic, which is a kind of saturation by rhetoric, makes both those distances explicit.

It even seems that Boileau viewed epic itself as a periphrastic form. These are certainly the terms in which he presents it in *L'Art poétique*:

> Là pour nous enchanter tout est mis en usage.
> ...
> Ce n'est plus la vapeur qui produit le tonnere;
> C'est Jupiter armé pour effrayer la terre.
> Un orage terrible aux yeux des matelots,
> C'est Neptune en courroux qui gourmande les flots.
> Echo n'est plus un son qui dans l'air retentisse:
> C'est une nymphe en pleurs qui se plaint de Narcisse.
> Ainsi, dans cet amas de nobles fictions,
> Le poète s'égaye en mille inventions,
> Orne, élève, embellit, agrandit toutes choses ...
>
> (III 163–75)

(*There, so as to enchant us, all is put to use .... It is no longer a cloud that produces thunder: it is Jupiter in arms to startle the earth. A storm terrible to the eyes of the sailors is wrathful Neptune chiding the waves. Echo is no longer a sound reverberating on the air: it is a nymph in tears lamenting Narcissus. Thus, in this concourse of noble fictions, the poet delights in a thousand inventions: ornaments, elevates, embellishes, enlarges everything ...*)

He is actually playing across contemporary commonplaces. Like many others, he sees epic as the 'ornamenting' and 'embellishing' of the real, with a view to 'enlarging' and 'elevating' it (the verse 'sinks', on the contrary, according to line 189, without these ornaments), in an untiring process of change. In the epic world, reality is renamed, through the poet's avoidance of calling a storm a storm; an echo is no longer a sound, and it is not clouds that cause thunder. The next lines, offered as an illustration of the precept, reveal his own perspective, when he claims that for Aeneas and his vessels to be borne to the African coast by a storm is 'nothing but an ordinary and common occurrence', whereas what is striking is to read of Juno pursuing her revenge on Troy across the waves, and of Eolus seconding her by releasing his mutinous winds from their prisons, etc. The real which is to be transformed, while not trivial, is specifically the 'ordinary' and the 'common'; and the move from common reality to uncommon verse is presented in the same terms as the move towards the periphrasis about his age and his wig in *Epistle X*. The poetry of divine rivalry and intervention in worldly affairs in the first book of the *Aeneid* 'says nothing other than that' the Trojan ships were blown to Africa by a storm. It is not that Boileau refuses to recognise that the epic deals with actions that are already great, with 'amazing deeds' (l. 249) or with the 'destiny of the Latin race' (l. 284), but that what interests him, seemingly, is its ability to transfigure the ordinary. Whatever else poetry may achieve, he sees its essential role as being to raise the world of common experience.

One remembers that Pope, when explaining epic machinery in the dedication of *The Rape of the Lock*, speaks rather in the same terms: 'For the ancient Poets are in one respect like many modern Ladies; Let an action be never so trivial in it self, they always make it appear of the utmost Importance.' The tone is badinage, yet the point seems seriously made. Pope would at least agree that the grand theme of epic, which is already an enlargement of life, affects all the small things on which it lights, enlarging even them.

Boileau also considers, incidentally, the effect on the reader, whom he sees drawn into the new world of the epic as if by magic, since although *enchanter*, the word to describe this effect, means to fill with wonder or admiration, it also implies 'to enchant' in the older sense of laying under a spell. In the fifth line of the same canto he uses another term common to the period, in claiming that tragedy acts similarly 'pour nous charmer', to charm us, where the

magical sense is again present. Whatever the exact significance of this vocabulary, he is quite clearly suggesting that to experience art in its highest reaches is to pass through into a reality new-made. Of particular interest are the musical references in the etymology of the two words, which take one back to the Latin *cantare* and *carmen*. They recall Longinus's musical comparison for periphrasis, and it would be satisfying to think that Boileau intended them.

* * *

Le Lutrin, along with its satire and its moral gravity, operates to transform the world. That *The Rape of the Lock* does likewise should be evident, and there may be a reference to the fact in that perfect description of the poem in line 5: 'Slight is the Subject, but not so the Praise'. According to a first reading, the word 'praise' reaches, via the translations by Sedley and Dryden, to the *gloria* that Virgil expects to receive, according to the sixth line of the fourth Georgic, despite his likewise inconsiderable theme. This Georgic is of interest to mock-heroic, as critics have shown, through its description of the life of bees in terms of epic paraphernalia: Virgil is already heightening the real, making a 'mighty pomp' out of 'little things' in Dryden's version (one remembers Boileau's 'petites choses'), by the power of a literary act. Does Pope's line also imply that as well as receiving he is bestowing praise, electing humble material yet elevating it in the praise of verse? There is a passage of Dryden himself, in 'A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire', which may be relevant here, his comment on Boileau's *Lutrin* that 'his subject is trivial, but his verse is noble'. Pope's subject is trivial, but he makes noble verse out of its praising, out of its laudation and transfiguration of a tenuous reality in the epic structure, the heroic incidents, the enlarging figures, the 'machinery', and the continuous delicacy of writing. The poem itself is a kind of praise, of language and of the world transformed.

Its surface details certainly draw attention to the poem as a finely wrought language, one example among many being its numerous puns. Like the puns of *Le Lutrin*, they highlight the writing activity, not through any mesmerised absorption in *écriture* but because the splendour of their rewriting of the world is partly what they are about. Most of them function, indeed, in terms of the mock-heroic: they are mock-heroic puns. There are no doubt several ways of responding when Belinda adores the '*Cosmetic*' rather than the

cosmic powers (I 124), decides the general fate not with a political stratagem but with a *'Trick'* at cards (III 94), or arms herself with a deadly *'Bodkin'* which is less dagger than hair ornament (V 88), or when the fashionable 'Vapors' of the spleen mingle with gloomy vapours of the underworld (IV 18, 39, 59); as when in *Le Lutrin* a bailiff's 'exploit' or writ stands in for the exploits of epic (III 107). According to a conventional understanding, Pope would be playing with extremes of scale so as to establish an equilibrium; and this may well be the case. But one might also feel on these occasions the sudden inrush of the grander world, and the opening of the ordinary to more ample dimensions.

The views of Pope as wise satirist or as recreative poet are not, in any case, mutually exclusive, and this is nowhere more striking than in the deployment of Rosicrucian spirits. These derive from many sources, some of which are of particular interest to us here. That the 'thousand bright Inhabitants of Air' (I 28) result from the 'Millions of spiritual creatures' that walk the earth in *Paradise Lost* (IV 677) is simply as it should be, since it secures their status as mock-heroic. They would also seem to relate, however, to this passage in *Le Lutrin* about the dormitory of a Cistercian abbey and the activities there of the acolytes of 'Ease':

> Les Plaisirs nonchalants folâtrent à l'entour.
> L'un pétrit dans un coin l'embonpoint des chanoines;
> L'autre broie en riant le vermillon des moines:
> La Volupté la sert [la Mollesse] avec des yeux dévots,
> Et toujours le Sommeil lui verse des pavots.
>
> (II 100–4)

(*Nonchalant Pleasures frolic all around. One kneads in a corner the plumpness of the canons; another pounds, laughing, the vermilion of the monks; Voluptuousness serves Ease with devoted looks, and Sleep pours poppies on her continually.*)

In quickening those traditional personifications in the sylphs whose concern is the appearance and wellbeing not of monks but of 'the Fair' (II 91), Pope makes them more vivid and, strangely, more real. And the derivation from the angels of his own version of Psalm 91 has a small but very pointed significance. In the lines: 'I see protecting Myriads round thee fly, / And all the bright *Militia* of the

sky', he forged a synonym for the Authorised Version's 'host of heaven' via the Vulgate's *militia coeli*, which was later to provide the *Rape* with the similar line: 'The light *Militia* of the lower Sky' (I 42). In the difference between his two texts, however, lies a considerable feat of self-translation. He has taken a word that one associates with burly Roman *milites*, and that in the psalm paraphrase retains what one would have thought to be its inevitable suggestion of masculine power, and turned it into something aerial and delicate, by virtue of the new line whose semantics and phonology play through it. The meaning of 'light', and also the effect on the ear of the running l's, cause the reader to hear the word *Militia* differently: they change, in effect, the sounds that it makes, along with the connotations of those sounds.

The verbal mutation has not occurred in the interests of mere fancy. Consider the lightness of the spirits in the passage where Ariel summons his 'Denizens of Air' to protect Belinda during her voyage on the river:

> The lucid Squadrons round the Sails repair:
> Soft o'er the Shrouds Aerial Whispers breathe,
> That seem'd but *Zephyrs* to the Train beneath.
> Some to the Sun their Insect-Wings unfold,
> Waft on the Breeze, or Sink in Clouds of Gold.
> Transparent Forms, too fine for mortal Sight,
> Their fluid Bodies half dissolv'd in Light.
>
> (II 56–62)

This is surely one of the great moments in Pope's transformational poetry. It seems at first glance that he is not writing about a real world at all, but delighting in his own fantasy. And yet the sylphs are subtly related to the real: if their whispers 'seem' to be zephyrs, with the implication that what are actually zephyrs might only seem to be the whispers of sylphs, it is also implied that the aerial whispers that do breathe in the poetry would be audible to poetic ears, just as the sylphs' transparent forms, which are 'too fine for mortal Sight', are available to the fineness of poetic vision. As one penetrates the poetry one realises, in fact, that the spirits are a modality of a real and indeed a local scene, the Thames from London to Hampton Court. They are a way of perceiving and describing the breezes, the lights, and the shimmering colours

along the river, presumably observed in London and situated in the poem along the stretch of water part of which Pope was later to command from his villa at Twickenham:

> Loose to the Wind their airy Garments flew,
> Thin glitt'ring Textures of the filmy Dew;
> Dipt in the richest Tincture of the Skies,
> Where Light disports in ever-mingling Dies,
> While ev'ry Beam new transient Colours flings,
> Colours that change when'er they wave their Wings.
>
> (ll. 63–8)

The poetry is working and transforming an everyday spectacle, what is seen, and well seen, being re-imagined as the constantly changing movements of marvellous small creatures. Whereas Boileau's 'Plaisirs' are abstractions, Pope's sylphs are both physical and not physical: almost spiritual bodies, in their way. They inhabit a realm only partly involved in matter, and suggest the changing of the material into something just beyond itself.

It is as if Pope were providing another answer to the problem that Dryden poses in 'The Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry, and Poetic Licence' prefixed to *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man*, his adaptation of *Paradise Lost*. If poetry is imitation, how, Dryden asks, should one 'image' poetical fictions such as hippocentaurs and chimeras, angels and immaterial substances, some of which are 'quite out of Nature' and of others of which 'we can have no notion'? Pope's master-stroke is to elicit the creatures from the world of sense, to convert the real into their bodies and, by describing their bodies, to illuminate the real, in a kind of writing which, while richly inventive, is still a process of 'imitation'.

The change to and fro is perfectly caught in the line: 'Their fluid Bodies half dissolv'd in Light', which may derive, incidentally, from a line in *The State of Innocence* that Dryden goes on to adduce as an example of his own 'imaging', where seraph and cherub leave their charge, 'And all dissolv'd in Hallelujahs lye'. In a scene where water and daylight meet, and the air seems almost palpable, Pope evokes, with a technique reminiscent of La Fontaine's, a fluidity passing into light and a light passing into fluidity, and the half-presence, in that natural yet nearly supernatural transaction, of bodies which, though clearly more of this world than Dryden's, are also somehow

other. Strangely, the unlikely word 'half' has a history in pre-Romantic and Romantic epistemology, in Edward Young's *Night-Thoughts*, where the senses 'half create the wondrous world they see' (VI 427), and in Wordsworth's version of this passage, in 'Tintern Abbey':

> ... all the mighty world
> Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
> And what perceive.
>
> (ll. 106–8)

Is it fanciful to think that Pope in 1713 is also entertaining a view of the mind's power to contribute to the external world (without any limiting reference to Locke), and only allowing his imagined creatures to half disappear into the observed?

One notices, moreover, that insofar as this is a description of reality, it is principally about light. It is light that produces the scene, the water-lights and the sun-lights, that flings transient and changing colours, that 'disports', and that half becomes the bodies of the sylphs. From the beginning, 'lucid' squadrons replace the bright Squadrons of Spenser and Milton.[6] One knows that in Pope's scheme of things light is of some consequence. Nature is a '*Universal* Light' in *An Essay on Criticism* (ll. 70–1), written some four years before the revised *Rape*, and Truth a '*resistless Day*' (l. 212); while in both versions of *The Dunciad* it is light that disappears at the restoration of the empire of Chaos and Night. It is central, of course, to the over-all action of the *Rape*. Pope clearly relates physical light to this figurative light, and ultimately to Christ, whom he names in *Messiah*, composed about a year before the revision, not as light itself but, more boldly, as 'The LIGHT HIMSELF' (l. 103). I am not sure whether the passage on the sylphs bears this kind of implication, and it is obviously not Christological; it does seem, however, to be at the least an exploration of the invisible within the visible, and to have, beneath its 'slight lyric grace', an almost mystical attentiveness.

We are still, furthermore, in the domain of periphrasis. The sylphs are periphrases of various lights. And isn't the whole of the *Rape* a recreative circumlocution? The basic incident of the stealing of a lock is periphrased out, as it were, of all proportion, and the most celebrated of the events that constitute the action are

ambagious in the extreme. Belinda at her toilet, the card game, and the coffee taking, 'say nothing other than that' the young lady put on her make-up, and so on; yet the concert of the orbiting phrases ushers the reader into a new world that he had not suspected of existing in such quotidian ceremonials.[7] It is once again the familiarity of the experience that heightens the glory of the transformation, by locating it in the world not of epic enterprise but of daily occurrence. Few poems, moreover, have more thoroughly furnished 'small things' with a vivid, circumlocutory elegance, rendering a pair of scissors as a 'glitt'ring *Forfex*' (III 147), or a twist of hair encased in a ring as being 'Expos'd thro' Crystal to the gazing Eyes, / And heighten'd by the Diamond's circling Rays' (IV 114–5). Pope even more than Boileau convinces one that mock-heroic is an art of periphrasis, and that he is master of that art.[8]

Indeed, in exploring *The Rape of the Lock* in these terms, one becomes aware how much of Pope's poetry is eloquently periphrastic. Consider these often discussed lines from the fourth of the *Moral Essays*, the 'Epistle to Burlington':

> Another age shall see the golden Ear
> Imbrown the Slope, and nod on the Parterre,
> Deep Harvests bury all his pride has plann'd,
> And laughing Ceres re-assume the land.
>
> (ll. 173–6)

The final line, which everyone admires, is a splendid periphrasis for something like 'cereal crops will spread over the fields again'. In fact, Pope has already been sending periphrasis melodiously through the discourse, causing 'golden Ear' and 'Deep Harvests' to respond to the word 'corn' and to the image that it arouses, with a view to this conclusive enlargement of the harmony. Since the line repeats the previous line, it is also 'superfluous', and so an overt act of naming and renaming. Neither a precise description nor a flight into abstraction, it reawakens the perceived, viewing the real scene as alive with the presence of a kind of realised myth, a foreign goddess made plausible by the imagination, a laughing She.

One wonders if periphrasis is not simply another name for the imagination, or for one of its typical procedures. And if imagination in the *Rape* is periphrastic, it is also metamorphic. (This is not the case in *Le Lutrin*. Pope has simply taken the next step, for as

periphrasis engenders change implicitly, metamorphosis does so explicitly.) The poem announces itself in these terms. It had lines from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as its epigraph in the editions of 1714 and 1715, and it still advances, according to the dedication, from a 'Vision at the Beginning' to a 'Transformation at the End'. Again, the tone is light but the process referred to is a profound one, and the transformation of the hair into a comet is, after all, to recur to an earlier discussion, a triumph of light. The action of the poem, in which Belinda, who rivals the sun (II 3), is protected by bright spirits and opposed by the dusky Umbriel, is resolved in a metamorphosis that 'adds new Glory to the shining Sphere' (V 142). One notes that both of Pope's mock-epics enact that fundamental symbolic contention, with opposite outcomes and in very different moods. Many of the constituents of the poem are also metamorphic. This is the case of the larger periphrases (another way of describing what happens to Belinda's dressing table, for example, is to say that it is metamorphosed into an altar), and of the 'changes' wrought by Spleen (IV 48), while the spirits themselves are the result of a metamorphosis, a 'soft Transition' (I 49) of earthly women to their corresponding elements.

Again, incidentally, punning is involved. The 'rising' of the lock at the close (V 123) is announced by two dormant metaphors in the opening lines: 'What dire Offence from am'rous Causes springs, / What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things'. In three at least of the four 'transitions', not only do 'fiery' termagants become salamanders, but the 'graver' prude 'sinks downward', appropriately, to become an earthly gnome, and the 'light' coquettes naturally repair 'aloft' (I 59–65). In this area too, the presence of punning is suitable to the theme. Through its readiness to uncover improbable analogies, the pun seems by its very nature a potential vehicle for metamorphosis.[9]

Most significantly, the metamorphosis of the lock is said to be invisible to the humans in the poem. This is partly a mock-heroic joke: only the Muse sees the hair ascend as only Proculus saw the heavenly translation of Romulus (V 123–6). Yet there is a more searching intent, surely, in the fact that Pope requires us, for the concluding fiction, to 'trust the Muse', on the grounds that the ascension can only be seen by 'quick Poetic Eyes' (V 123–4). He reminds the reader that the sylphs in the lights and breezes along the river were likewise 'too fine for mortal Sight', and, by a final flourish, calls attention to poetry, to his act of writing, to the poem

itself as the place where the metamorphosis is in fact 'seen' and accomplished. Indeed, it is less the lock that is finally in question than its owner's 'name', and in the last line 'Belinda' is eternally and quite explicitly 'inscribed', as in the Renaissance tradition, within the poem that celebrates her. Pope presents the work, in other words, as a celebratory and metamorphic naming. It is about change, about seeing that change (we must indeed trust the Muse, since, in poetry as outside it, believing is seeing), and about poetry as the agent of change. The poem refers to itself as being, precisely, an enactment of poetry.

* * *

Mock-heroic, it seems, or at least the area of it that we have been considering, is where the process of closing with the real and transforming it in art is brought into sharp focus. Insofar as this is a narrative form, it gathers its characters and events and objects quite overtly into a story world, constructed from the conventions of epic; yet from another perspective, what it gathers also remains obstinately ordinary, or rather, the commonness of the world being worked reasserts itself within the transformation. In its bizarre, off-beat way, it thereby brings into the open the need for poetry, the need for change, and the need for the everyday. Contrary to appearances, it is central to the practice of writing.

Because it remakes the world comically, it also invites one to call it a 'recreative' form with both pronunciations of the word, and to realise how suggestive is that possibility of merging the two meanings. At the same time, the world that it takes on is foolish and maybe evil. The material of *Le Lutrin* and *The Rape of the Lock* in particular is contention (trivial rather than epic, but contention nevertheless), and part of the aim of the poem is to attempt, or to recount, a reconciliation. As the celebration of a changing reality and of writing, and also the satire of a deficient reality, mock-heroic accompanies its rhetoric of praise with a rhetoric of blame. For this reason too it is fundamental, since its dual strategy is natural, one might argue, to all writing at work in a fallen world.

4

'True Expression'

I have been drawing out a poetics from *The Rape of the Lock*, as from *Le Lutrin*, but Pope himself had already discussed these matters, of course, in *An Essay on Criticism*. Part of the interest of that work is that, while it too is concerned with the power of words over things, it envisages, at one moment at least, a perfect relation between them.

The pleasure of commonplaces when they are written by great writers is that they are rarely commonplace. This is true even of a celebrated instance which, in its own terms, actually recommends commonplace, and, since it does so after several others, practises its own advice, in a happy coincidence of saying and being:

> *True Wit* is *Nature* to Advantage drest,
> What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest*.
>
> (*An Essay on Criticism*, ll. 297–8)

What strikes me as most important here is absent from all the probable sources given in the Twickenham Edition (volume 1) of Pope's works. It is not in any hints that Pope may have taken from Davenant's declaration, in the preface to *Gondibert*, about wanting to bring truth home to men 'by representing Nature, though not in an affected, yet in an unusual dress', or from Dryden's definition of wit, in 'The Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry', as a 'propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject'; or indeed from his own letter to Wycherley of 26 December 1704: 'True Wit I believe, may be defin'd a Justness of Thought, and a Facility of Expression; or (in the Midwives phrase) a perfect Conception, with an easy Delivery.'[1] All these actually quite varied passages are concerned, like the couplet, with 'Nature', thought, words. None suggests, however, that it is to the advantage of Nature to be expressed; that Nature needs language; that words are good for the world.

There, surely, lies the deep, ontological bearing of the lines. And what they imply is missing most tellingly from Boileau's otherwise close anticipation of them in his Preface of 1701, which Ozell translated: '*Wit* is not *Wit*, but as it says something every Body thought of, and that in a lively, delicate, and New Manner.' Boileau is looking for striking ways of stating common thoughts, not meditating on the power of language. It is lacking too in Pope's other apparent glossing of Boileau in a letter to Walsh of 2 July 1706: 'the Perfection of Sense' is 'to express those (things) *best* that have been said *oftenest*', where he is excited by the virtuosity, and perhaps the competitiveness, involved in achieving something aptly described by a double superlative. Nor, for that matter, is it to be found in Addison's comment on both Boileau and the *Essay* in number 253 of *The Spectator*: 'And here give me leave to mention what Monsieur *Boileau* has so very well enlarged upon in the Preface to his Works, that Wit and fine Writing doth not so much consist in advancing Things that are new, as in giving Things that are known an agreeable Turn. It is impossible for us, who live in the later Ages of the World, to make Observations in Criticism, Morality, or any Art or Science, which have not been touched upon by others. We have little else left us, but to represent the common Sense of Mankind in more strong, more beautiful, or more uncommon Lights.' Addison is stirred, from the perspective of La Bruyère's melancholy about coming too late into the world when everything has been said,[2] to discover new and better turns for old ideas. Only Pope in the couplet on 'true wit' (as also La Fontaine, who seems not to have been important to him) reaches the quite other level of thought, which even critics aware that he is not advocating elegantly phrased truisms don't quite articulate, where 'Nature', in its deliberate complexity of meaning, is placed beside language, and finds in its expression advantage, a finer dress, a change for the better.

A further distinction of the couplet is its doubleness of tone. Given the primacy of what Empson calls the 'slang' meaning of *wit* among the bright people whom Pope was addressing, which corresponds to its usual modern meaning,[3] the lines can be read as being themselves witty. Pope arrests his reader with the promise of a definition: '*True Wit* ...', and then supplies it, in terms which could suggest personal display, social smartness: 'Advantage', 'drest', 'so well *Exprest*'. Some readers could hear the lines as if Pope might exclaim of an author, 'He expresses his thoughts *so well*!', and

one sees that such readers have been fooled. For the couplet really has a quite other, searching seriousness. It is witty, in fact, in a variant of Eliot's sense of the word; and being a witty epigram about wit it once again achieves a kind of luminous infolding.

The 'dress' metaphor recurs in another familiar passage:

> Expression is the *Dress* of *Thought*, and still
> Appears more *decent* as more *suitable*.
>
> (ll. 318–9)

The cliché here seems to be offered as one, as an aphoristic heightening, or re-dressing, of several passages in Dryden. It is also difficult not to see it as entailing the separation of thought and language that one associates with neoclassical pronouncements, and against which the tradition of protest stretches back to German and English Romanticism. Yet strangely, this commonplace commonplace follows a triplet which is in no way so:

> But true *Expression*, like th'unchanging *Sun*,
> *Clears*, and *improves* whate'er it shines upon,
> It *gilds* all Objects, but it *alters* none.

I find this one of the most exploratory and exhilarating passages in Pope, though commentators seem to presume they know what it means already because it looks like things that they have read elsewhere. Every detail counts, and each of them is surprising. Take 'clears'. Doesn't it again indicate that we need language (or rather, language perfectly achieved – true expression) so as to be able to 'see' the world? Without language, one may infer, reality is in shadow, and the power of words is to make it both more visible and more attractive. 'Improves' goes further. It has some quite elevated meanings throughout Pope's work as a whole. The 'Ode for Musick, on St. Cecilia's Day', written in the same period, claims that music can 'antedate' the bliss above by 'improving' our joys below (ll. 122–3); while at a climactic moment of the much later 'Epistle to Burlington', Bathurst and Burlington are offered in answer to the question, 'Who then shall grace, or who improve the Soil?' (l. 177). 'Improve' takes a colouring from 'grace', and to prevent one assuming that 'grace' carries only its aesthetic or social meaning, it is confirmed two lines later in its most weighty, by the verb in the

astonishing assertion: 'Tis Use alone that sanctifies Expence'. The largest performance of the word, however, occurs in Pope's even later list of 'Contents' for the *Essay on Criticism* itself, where he declares not only that art and rules are 'methodis'd Nature' (a commonplace) but that, by them, Nature is *'Improv'd'*.

One needs to take the full force of the idea that Nature is improved by human art and rules, and the world cleared and improved by the true expression of human language. Again, this is not exactly the notion, familiar to Pope, that art is an amendment of Nature since it imitates an unchanging ideal free of the defects of our corrupt, sublunary world. For one thing, he is discussing not the general work of poetry but the work specifically of expression – the power of language in verse. For another, he alters the notion by his simile. While we are considering single words it would indeed be uncivil to ignore 'like'. The whole poem teems, of course, with comparisons; it manoeuvres constantly by means of 'as', 'so', 'like', 'thus'. The comparisons have numerous roles, which include providing contexts for the discussion of writing and judging (manners and fashion, mostly, along with other arts), promoting understanding, persuading, scoring points, involving fools in incongruity. They argue a world open to reason, ordered, and even disordered, so as to offer instruction. They differ, even the delicate *'Words* are like *Leaves'* of line 309, from Romantic similes, which intend, as acts of imagination that half-create affinities and correspondences, to bind a world otherwise unbound. Yet many do probe reality, and the comparisons between Art and Nature in particular declare an actual relationship. It is a fact, the poem claims, that we are pleased by *'brave Disorder'* in the one as by a 'shapeless *Rock*' or 'hanging *Precipice*' in the other (ll. 152–60), and impressed in both by wholes rather than parts (ll. 243–52). One also notices that the two paragraphs over which we are engaged are singularly crammed with comparisons, and that, emerging from this intense relational wit, the 'like' of 'like th'unchanging *Sun*' creates a quite other effect. It responds to an apparently conventional simile of a few lines before, where *'False Eloquence'*, which covers everything with 'gaudy Colours', is said to be 'like the *Prismatic Glass*'. The 'colours' of rhetoric naturally suggest, by a kind of paronomastic de-metaphorising of the word, the prismatic colours of light, and the comparison is of the type intended to be apt and persuasive. To say, on the other hand, that true expression acts like the unchanging sun is to produce, as it were, an ontological simile. The lines don't only

mean that if you want to see how good writing works you might compare it with the sun, for instance; or even that the operations of the sun are a proper perspective from which to consider writing; or even again that writing affects us like the sun. They intimate, surely, that the role of true writing really *is* that of the sun, since the relation of writing to the sun is a part of reality. As, in Nature, sunlight clears and improves the world, so, again in Nature, the purpose, the objective intention, of writing truly is that the world should be cleared and improved. A possible further implication of this giving to writing such an ample dimension is that, as a natural process, the work of writing actually goes beyond that of the sun, since what it clears and improves may include the sun itself.

This 'like' is different from others: it changes the meaning of the word, so as to declare an existential, a teleological likeness. There is another likeness here, moreover, between writing and Nature, which is even closer than that of the most penetrating simile, and is secured by a pun:

> *False Eloquence*, like the *Prismatic Glass*,
> Its gawdy Colours spreads on *ev'ry place;*
> The Face of Nature we no more Survey,
> All glares *alike*, without *Distinction* gay:
> But true *Expression*, like th'unchanging *Sun*,
> *Clears*, and *improves* whate'er it shines upon.

Writing, one sees, when it is accurate, becomes the 'expression' on Nature's 'face'.[4]

True expression 'clears' and 'shines', and language is like light, not for the sake of comparison but because it is so. Once again, we are not quite looking at a commonplace. Pope's wording may well have come to him from reading the sentences in Boileau's preface that precede his adumbration of 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'. The 'Agreeableness' and the 'Salt' in a work, Boileau had written, consist mainly in offering the reader nothing but 'True Thoughts and Just Expressions. The Mind of Man,' he continues, 'is naturally full of an infinite Number of confus'd Ideas of *Truth*, which he oftentimes conceives (*entrevoit*) but by Halves; and nothing pleases him more, than when any of these Ideas are presented to him well Illustrated and Set in a Good Light.'[5] The last phrase, 'bien éclaircie, et mise dans un beau jour', could certainly give '*Clears*, and *improves* whate'er it shines upon' (as 'True

Thoughts and Just Expressions' might be telescoped into 'true *Expression*'). Yet Pope has taken this stock metaphor and surpassed it utterly – 'improved' it incomparably. For his imagery also refers back to famous earlier lines:

> *Unerring Nature*, still divinely bright,
> One *clear, unchang'd*, and *Universal* Light.
>
> (ll. 70–1)

By drawing on their vocabulary (*Clear, unchang'd*), the triplet insinuates that the action of expression upon objects relates not only to the natural light of the sun but to that 'light' of Nature where literal and figurative merge. To express truly is to open objects to the light that shines throughout – and that ultimately *is* – the creation.

One of the unnamed presences here is Newton. As false eloquence was compared to the decomposition of light in his prism, so true expression is referred to the perfect light which, in the terms of Pope's intended epitaph for him, he shed over the night in which Nature and her laws were hid. The other, seemingly, is God. The triplet banishes the various false lights of the previous lines ('glitt'ring Thoughts', '*glaring Chaos*', 'gawdy Colours') so as to give entry to the light of Nature, which, according to Pope's beliefs and to the earlier passage from which he is quoting, is nothing less than 'divinely' bright. I suggested in the previous chapter that the lights of *The Rape of the Lock* would not be unconnected to *Messiah's* description of Christ as 'The LIGHT HIMSELF'; here, by implication, it is the light of language that flows from the divine light, and spends on the world something of its lustre. The poem, for all its society brilliance and young man's sparkle, is a genuine quest: a search for light, and also for truth, for 'true genius' (l. 11), 'true taste' (l. 12), 'true ease in writing' (l. 362), etc., as well as true wit and true expression. It is a large idea, to associate expression with Truth, language with light. And it may be owing to that association that when, in 1717, Pope added, as line 724, the whole of the second line of Sheffield's *Essay on Poetry*, which begins:

> Of all those arts in which the wise excel,
> Nature's chief master-piece is writing well,

he detached it from its restrictive context and transformed it into an unqualified dictum. An argument about the rules and a puff for Sheffield lead to the startling assertion that good writing is the chief masterpiece of Nature.

Perhaps we are not meant to take literally a piece of bravado, an inordinate claim not quite made, through being placed in the current of a different argument. Language as light, however, does demand attention, and the next line is an unforeseeable, over-mastering climax:

> It *gilds* all Objects, but it *alters* none.

It is a moot point whether or not the perspective is changing here. Pope is declaring, surely with a kind of contained fervour, that true expression achieves the miracle of transforming the real, since reality needs art as much as objects need the sun, yet without altering it, without, as it were, denaturing it; of transposing the world into itself. The 'dress' of neoclassical theory is now a gilding – radiant sunlight – which one sees and rejoices in, and yet, since it is a transparent and not an obtrusive covering, what one sees, as with light itself, is simply the objects of the world, unchanged and yet made glorious in its light. Like the sun illuminating a landscape, it brings out what is already there, if only one could see it, at the same time adding a splendour of its own; it shows what is present, merely by its presence.

One realises the similarity to, and the vast distance from, the demand for 'a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear senses; a native easiness', in Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*, the second edition of which had appeared in 1702. Pope may even be deliberately rescuing poetry from Sprat's reduction of language to the role of stating and disappearing.

Not unexpectedly, the pressure and delight of the writing and the thinking (the think-writing, perhaps) have led to further wordplay. At first one reads the adjective 'unchanging' intransitively, only to realise, on reaching '*alters*', that it has a transitive meaning as well: the sun neither changes in itself nor changes the world on which it shines. The wordplay is also a small instance of 'true expression' as Pope is in the process of defining it.

The gilding falls pointedly on 'objects'. Up to this point, what has been expressed has been '*Thought*' (l. 298) or '*Sense*' (l. 310), and Pope will revert to '*Thought*', 'Conceit', '*Subjects*' and '*Sense*' in the following lines. Such things could also be, of course, the 'objects' of

language's concern. By turning to Nature's 'Face', however, to the '*Sun*', and then to 'Objects', he shifts attention, among the many meanings of 'Nature', to a physical world. In this perfect expression of a perfect unity, it is the world open to sight that is declared to be at its best in language. The lines celebrate language, writing, art, as being necessary to the appearance, the appearing, of the world, while at the same time celebrating the world, but specifically in its possibility, in what it may become in the unchanging change of poetry.

* * *

Pope enters and exits from this triplet, surrounding it with authentic commonplaces which it partly denies. This is not, I think, because he is confused, though heaven knows there are critics enough ready to catch him out. He seems to be hinting, rather, that this fullness of language and world is rare, and perhaps as uncontrollable as a sunburst; and maybe too that finding an 'advantageous' expression (l. 297) or a 'suitable' one (l. 319) is what we should normally aim for and the most that we usually manage. As he moves into the lines, moreover, the tone changes, just as 'like' changes; it is difficult to read them over with the same witty and audience-oriented extroversion. Their seriousness outweighs any other quality, and they achieve, indeed, a moving *gravitas*. The effect of coming upon them is not so different from working through Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' and suddenly encountering the lines about Time's wingèd chariot.

He manoeuvres, with intense scrupulousness and precision, between world and words. To understand his position, to follow through, that is, its implications, it will be useful to look both forward and backward in the tradition of English reflection on poetry. A glance at Wordsworth helps to confirm Pope's desire that language should not remain at an artificial distance from what it conveys. (One might have expected the contrary.) In the third essay 'Upon Epitaphs', Wordsworth pointedly repudiates the metaphor of language as the dress of thought, substituting another which our own period finds more persuasive. He applauds 'expressions which are not what the garb is to the body but what the body is to the soul, themselves a constituent part and power or function in the thought', and urges that if 'words be not ... an incarnation of the thought, but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill

gift'. One might infer a downright difference here from Pope, who is a named opponent at this juncture and the principal antagonist throughout the essays. Yet Wordsworth does not claim that words are inevitably, because of the nature of langauge, an incarnation rather than a clothing of thought, only that they should be; the failure of the epitaphs he discusses is precisely that their language *is* a mere dress, and unfitting at that. It is not the theory of language that is in question but the proper practice of language. Thought is incarnate, he might well have said, only in 'true expression'. Moreover, although Pope's concern in the following lines will be finding words well tailored to the sense, in the triplet (where his focus, to be sure, is not thought and feeling but 'Objects') he aims just as urgently towards a perfect union. 'False eloquence', in Pope no less than in Wordsworth, disbars us from Nature.

(Has it been noticed that Wordsworth too produced his own, characteristic, versions of 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'? In this same essay he defines as 'what is most needful and most difficult in an epitaph', 'to give to universally received truths a pathos and spirit which shall re-admit them into the soul like revelations of the moment'. In the second, he argues that epitaphs need thoughts and feelings 'which are in their substance common-place, and even trite', but adds: 'it is required that these truths should be instinctively ejaculated or should rise irresistibly from circumstances; in a word that they should be uttered in such connection ... as shall imply that (the writer) has mounted to the sources of things, penetrated the dark cavern from which the river that murmurs in everyone's ear has flowed from generation to generation'. The profound Wordsworthian illumination of the commonplace about the commonplace is in terms, not surprisingly, of the pathetic and spiritual power of poetry and the origins of creativity.)

Pope's deferring to Nature, to a world, that is, partly beyond the self, is also clear from another comparison with that passage in Edward Young's *Night-Thoughts* which was of importance to Wordsworth, and from which he quoted in 'Tintern Abbey'. Our senses, Young writes,

> Take in at once the landscape of the world,
> At a small inlet which a grain might close,
> And half create the wondrous world they see.
> Our senses, as our reason, are divine.

> But for the magic organ's powerful charm,
> Earth were a rude uncoloured chaos still.
> Objects are but th'occasion; ours th'exploit ...
>
> (*Night VI*, ll. 425–31)

Although Young's topic is the senses while Pope's is language, both are concerned with seeing the world, and their focus is partly epistemological. Had he read the lines, Pope would presumably not have countenanced the view (worked up from Locke) that the earth is a rude chaos without our intervention, but he does assume that it needs to be 'cleared' by human expression. A world without language – language well used – would be, if not uncoloured, certainly drab, and dull: a world without sunshine. The difference lies in Young's reduction of objects to the status of mere opportunities for the senses, and one doesn't need to be Pope to find the word 'exploit' chilling. For it is vital to Pope, as writer, and, it seems, as moral agent, to acknowledge the otherness of a reality. For him as for the Romantics, humans 'improve' the world, and 'objects' do stand in need of our art, but not so that we can perform as heroes.

The point may be reinforced by a comparison with Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*, which is exemplary as the poetics of a certain kind of Christianity. Its being founded in Christian thought is, of course, more explicit than in the case of Pope's *Essay*. It derives from a conviction that the whole world is fallen, as a result of 'that first accursed fall of Adam', and that we desire a better world, which it describes, in the terms of a Platonised Christianity, as 'that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith' and so lifted up 'from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own divine essence'. It also derives from a sense of the power of poetry, and celebrates, with enviable confidence, the poet's 'high flying liberty of conceit'. It includes, therefore, all the essentials of an overtly recreative poetics, and it looks famously towards possibility. 'Right poets', Sidney claims, 'to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be.'

This is another commonplace, incidentally, which has been expansively renewed. Sidney was following many others in repeating Aristotle's argument, in chapter 9 of the *Poetics*, that the poet's function is not 'to describe what has actually happened, but

the kinds of thing that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary'. I glanced at Johnson's later transformation of this idea, in the chapter on Milton. Sidney transfigures it with an adjective, and produces a phrase which might serve to define the aim of all poetry in a Christian perspective: 'the divine consideration of what may be'.

The argument is gathered and intensified in the *Apology*'s most famous words: 'Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.' One might say that the difference between what he and Pope desire for poetry is perfectly, though somewhat unexpectedly, summarised in the difference between his 'golden' and Pope's 'gilds'. Sidney's golden world is the product of the mind, which he sees, in company with other Renaissance critics, as already possessing a world of its own, over against, and superior to, the world of the senses. The mental world is as real as the sensible world, and since the latter is the soul's prison, it even partakes of a higher reality. The golden world of the poets is then 'in effect ... another nature', a bid to recover the golden age and to make a new paradise appear on earth. It is fictive, yet still real in that it relates to the ethical and political world of the here and now in which choices are to be made. The end of poetry is indeed to stir to action and to teach (it is 'an art ... of true doctrine'), and the very phrase that defines it as a searching of possibility defines it also as a searching of obligation, since poetry is both 'the divine consideration of what may be and should be'.

And yet that other nature, for all Sidney's moral seriousness (and whatever may be the case in his actual poetry), is still, in its way, an avoidance of this one. When he places the historian lower than the poet on the grounds that he is 'tied ... to the particular truth of things', and especially when he adds a new twist to that Aristotelian argument by declaring that the historian, in contradistinction to the poet, is 'captived to the truth of a foolish world', isn't he being grateful as a poet not to have to trammel in that fallen reality, as if he could free himself from it by his 'wit' and his writing? As a man he was involved, rather more than most poets, in the affairs of the world, and paid for that involvement with a price that almost silences one. It is the Platonising bent of his theology that accounts for the ambiguous involvement of his poetics.

Pope too has a high sense of the power and necessity of poetry, but what he wants from it is in no way that it should displace the usual world with its own splendour. The usual world, in its possibility, is the mark of his desire, and the place which it is the task of poetry to gild. On the other hand, the Fall, important to Sidney, is not really of consequence to Pope's poetics; or rather, it matters no more than it normally matters in the more optimistic reaches of Christian humanism. This is not to deny that the *Essay* is full of human folly, and laments the decline from a 'Golden Age' of *'Patriarch-Wits'* (ll. 478–9) – as *An Essay on Man* scathes human foolishness in a more biblical sense of the word, and looks back to an idyllic 'state of Nature' (III 148). Yet the experience of Eden still seems available, in writing and beyond. The Sidneyan couplet about *'Unerring Nature'* whose light is *'unchang'd'* clearly describes the world observable to the mind in the 1700s as if it were still the creation at the moment of the 'fiat lux' of the first day. By deducing from these lines the triplet on 'true expression', Pope implies that it is possible for language even now to operate in keeping with that original light. As one may see the world in the light that issues from God, so one may 'express' it rather, one imagines, as Adam named it.

Something like an experience of Eden is also promised in well known lines from the fourth *Moral Essay*, which I quoted in the previous chapter:

> Another age shall see the golden Ear
> Imbrown the Slope, and nod on the Parterre,
> Deep Harvests bury all his pride has plann'd,
> And laughing Ceres re-assume the land.
>
> (ll. 173–6)

To place 'age' near 'golden' is to suggest the golden age, which will become available, once the boastful landowner has been dismissed, not in the world of poetry but in a natural landscape. The passage alludes, moreover, to a description of Eden itself in *Paradise Lost*, from which I quoted when discussing Milton:

> ... Flow'rs worthy of Paradise, which not nice art
> In beds and curious knots, but Nature boon
> Poured forth profuse on hill and dale and plain,

> Both where the morning sun first warmly smote
> The open field, and where the unpierced shade
> Imbrowned the noontide bow'rs. Thus was this place,
> A happy rural seat of various view;
> Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm,
> Others whose fruit burnished with golden rind
> Hung amiable ...
>
> (IV 241–50)

Pope appropriates 'golden' and 'Imbrowned', to locate them at the same points in his own lines, and also the contrast between nice art and Nature. Surprisingly, Ceres too is lifted from this passage, from the tale that immediately follows about her daughter Proserpine in another Edenic setting, the vale of Enna; and while Milton, hinting of the Fall, recounts Proserpine's ravishment by Dis, which cost Ceres 'all that pain' (l. 271), Pope substitutes a later part of the story, with Ceres 'laughing' at her daughter's yearly return to the earth.

To accept his project in the *Essay* unmodified is therefore to allow a kind of prelapsarian poetics. And very appealing it is. Pope's writing is motivated by a search for singular harmony, which derives, I presume, from the same energies that drove his satire. Like Sidney, curiously, what he wanted was a form of paradise, and although this is well enough known the details are still remarkable. In moving, for instance, from false eloquence which acts like a prism to true expression which acts like the sun, he compares false language to an artifact but true language to a natural object, as if it were a blending with nature. The couplet about Nature that I have just quoted:

> *Unerring Nature*, still divinely bright,
> One *clear, unchang'd*, and *Universal* Light,
>
> (ll. 70–1)

is significantly different from its probable source in Roscommon's *Essay on Translated Verse*:

> *Truth* still is *One*; *Truth* is Divinely *bright*;
> No cloudy *Doubts* obscure her *Native light*.
>
> (ll. 193–4)

The natural world is not present in Roscommon, despite *'Native'*; the brightness, the clouds and the light intervene only as illustrative metaphor, and what they illustrate is the abstraction, 'Truth'. Pope's metaphor, on the other hand, invites one to consider light in its visibility, while the tenor of the metaphor is the same *'Nature'* in which that light participates. The lines cause 'Nature' as physical universe to merge with 'Nature' as the inherent world-order undisturbed by sin. Pope even has the faculty of giving natural presence to a metaphor when one is far from expecting it, as in a later passage where it *is* a question of Truth rather than of Nature, and where the sense of an argumentative metaphor is strong:

> Pride, where Wit fails, steps in to our Defence,
> And fills up all the *mighty Void* of *Sense*!
> If once right Reason drives *that Cloud* away,
> *Truth* breaks upon us with *resistless Day*.
>
> (ll. 209–12)

The personifications, with their 'stepping' and 'driving', seem to culminate in a Truth which replaces a figurative cloud with figurative light. The imaginative focus shifts, however, with 'breaks upon us', and one is called to another kind of attention by *'resistless Day'*. The power of the physical description, which is owing, I take it, to the use of *'Day'* rather than 'light', causes the metaphor to work, as it were, in both directions: as truth breaks upon us with the force of irresistible light, so the daylight breaks upon us with the force of truth.

The same urge to reconcile the dualities of experience accounts for his insistence that the rules of art were not *'devis'd'* but *'discover'd'* (l. 88), and for the excitement with which he imagines Virgil coming to realise that *'Nature* and *Homer* were ... the *same*' (l. 135). It accounts too for a line in the epigraph on Kneller: 'Whose Art was Nature, and whose Pictures thought', where painting, in achieving its own true expression, becomes a perfect coincidence not only of Nature and Art but of the sensible and the intellectual. And it accounts for the jubilant moment in the 'Epistle to Burlington' (ll. 57–64) where he urges architects and gardeners not to undertake their business without consulting the 'Genius of the Place'. The *genius loci* is presented as intensely active, and with an eye to the aesthetically pleasing (he 'scoops in circling theatres the Vale'), but above all as

collaborating with the artist. Allow him his due role, says Pope, and he will further all your efforts: he 'Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs'. What surely stirs Pope here is a kind of practice of Eden, an experience of reciprocation in the very act of artistry. Rarely, moreover, did he use his characteristic figures with such point. Alliteration links the responding forces, in the 'planting' and the 'painting', while chiasmus frames a man's activities by those of Nature.

The poet is necessary, in this poetics, for the sake of the actual. He names or, in Pope's own phrase, finds true expression, and what he names is a real world, shared with others. The recognition of that common reality by no means excludes the possibility of poetry transforming the world; in more exuberantly 'artistic' mood, as in *The Rape of the Lock*, he will cause the stress to fall on the transformation and on the poetry. The ideal here is nevertheless to improve without altering, and certainly to gild this world rather than creating another, golden one. In many ways I am sure this is not only appealing but extraordinarily wise, a moral and aesthetic judgement that any writer might reflect on with profit; yet it remains oblique to the poetics of a fallen world. That clause, 'but it *alters* none', is in one perspective thoroughly convincing, spiritually right, and close, as it happens, when combined with 'gilds', to the central preoccupation of this book. Reality, however, we understand it, does have to be protected from the covetousness of the imagination. We do desire a language, I believe, in our best moments, so light that it could give us the world. If the 'objects' of the world are fallen, however, along with the person living among them, the 'improvement' they require is deep and searching; and if their hope is not in a now lost, or never having existed, Eden but in a future Paradise, or a futurity of human effort, they do need altering, though without, paradoxically, being turned into something else. Another comparison with Wordsworth would show him shifting the perspective and entering this other wisdom. There is a surprisingly close relation of Pope's triplet to a passage at the end of Book V of *The Prelude* that I shall be considering in the next chapter, where Wordsworth does present language as altering the very 'forms and substances' of the world. His matching imagery of verse as a 'light divine' accompanies an exploration of the 'endless changes' that it operates.

(What I am reaching for is the notion that the lights change if one replaces belief in an unerring Nature which has somehow survived the Fall, if only in human conception or the mind of God, and towards

which artistic and other energies should be directed, by what seems the biblical belief in the redemption of the fallen world through its recreation, through its being changed utterly while yet remaining the 'heavens' and the 'earth'.)

And if Pope's position here seems, in the end, arcadian, this is owing even more to his sense of language. For though language does act on occasion as a light, one is surely right to object that it is also a darkness, and that, if we learn from it the possibility of paradise, it also teaches that our present estate is fallen. It is an easy point to make, but doesn't the essential 'strife' alluded to in the *Essay on Man* (I. 169) also set words against things, and art against nature – and without the resolution of that conflict, moreover, being in any way evident?

The matter is supremely delicate, and I have no wish to conclude. I shalln't presume to circumscribe Pope, and I am aware that what I have discussed in his poetics will have different kinds of significance for different readers. I should like to end simply with two observations. The first is that, as a corollary to the foregoing, his poetics, and indeed his poems, might be characterised by their not being concerned for any further reality. Compare, for instance, '*Truth* breaks upon us with *resistless Day*' with Wordsworth's line in *The Prelude* (VII 649): 'As if admonished from another world'. There is almost the same shock, the same receiving of a vast blow, but with Pope the intervention comes from within the world, and it is this world that is suddenly present.

On the other hand, he is capable of imagining with great power an ultramundane irruption in the apocalyptic future. It is arguable, in fact, that when he recalls this line in the invocation to the New Jerusalem towards the end of *Messiah*, it is for one of the most impressive poetic namings of this world changing into another:

> See Heav'n its sparkling Portals wide display,
> And break upon thee in a Flood of Day!
> No more the rising *Sun* shall gild the Morn,
> Nor Evening *Cynthia* fill her silver Horn,
> But lost, dissolv'd in thy superior Rays;
> One Tyde of Glory, one unclouded Blaze,
> O'erflow thy Courts: The LIGHT HIMSELF shall shine
> Reveal'd; and *God*'s eternal Day be thine!
>
> (ll. 97–104)

The natural lights are not superseded by the heavenly 'Day' but are lost and dissolved into it. Another world intervenes, but so as to absorb this one.

5

Wordsworth and the 'Mystery of Words'

I referred forward to Wordsworth when discussing Pope, and it is clear that anyone committed to exploring, as reader or as writer, the sources of poetry, and the power of the language of poetry to grasp a transcendent world, must engage with him sooner or later. For not only did Wordsworth renew the understanding of inspiration, in a perspective quite different from that of Milton, and of the process by which reality is changed when drawn into 'the mystery of words', but he also exemplifies, in English writing, the specific desire for a transcendence within the everyday.

One might think first about his approach to the relation of poetry to paradise, and look initially not at *The Prelude*, the work where there is no doubt the most to learn, but at the only completed book of *The Recluse*, whose final section became what amounts to a manifesto for Wordsworth's poetry in its entirety. In the course of that book he describes an actual place, the vale of Grasmere, as a kind of Eden, apparently repeating the eighteenth-century view of the Lake District:

> 'Tis, but I cannot name it, 'tis the sense
> Of majesty, and beauty, and repose,
> A blended holiness of earth and sky,
> Something that makes this individual Spot,
> This small Abiding-place of many Men,
> A termination, and a last retreat,
> A Centre, come from whereso'er you will,
> A Whole without dependence or defect,
> Made for itself; and happy in itself,
> Perfect Contentment, Unity entire.
>
> (ll. 142–51)

If we were meant to take this on its own, it seems to me that it ought to occasion dissent. I suppose that we have all had something of such a vision – Wordsworth himself calls it more interestingly a 'sensation' in line 137; yet if one sees a peopled landscape, or an unpeopled, as an Eden, a blended holiness, perfect, entire and without defect (not through an achievement of perception, I presume, but through a sudden gift), does it remain intact, or does the exultation rather generate disquiet, discontent? – as if one were incapable of appropriating what is offered, for being, perhaps, the flaw in it; or the wholeness became vulnerable; or the perfection were the sign of a further perfection just out of reach. And in fact one becomes aware that Wordsworth's vision too is insecure, if what I take to be the many reminiscences of John of Gaunt's eulogy of England in act 2, scene 1, of *Richard II* carry with them something of the threat there to this 'other Eden'; and that these lines are not intended to be read in isolation. The meaning of their paradise derives from two previous passages. The opening of the poem tells of a schoolboy arriving in Grasmere and declaring it to be paradise, but then describes his thought of living there (in a rare piece of ambiguous, or rather, double syntax, where the meaning changes after the line-break) as

> A fancy in the heart of what might be
> The lot of Others, never could be his.
>
> (ll. 17–18)

The boy is referred to, moreover, in the third person, although one is soon to learn that he was the young Wordsworth, and his exclamation is reported in that kind of indirect speech which allows the third person to be retained: he stopped, one is told,

> and, sighing said,
> "What happy fortune were it here to live!
> And, if a thought of dying, if a thought
> Of mortal separation, could intrude
> With paradise before him, here to die!"
>
> (ll. 10–14)

The syntax is again significant, in suggesting a degree of distance from the child; and it is remarkable that Wordsworth has insinuated into the very first lines of his work the fundamental idea related to that distance, by stating, apparently as an unimportant aside, that the boy's age has now escaped his 'memory'. By intruding, into the blithe mood of the opening, notions of exclusion, albeit untroubled, remoteness, and, indeed, death, he hints at paradise as lost, or withheld.

In the other passage, Wordsworth realises, on returning to live in that Grasmere that he had seen as a boy, that he is receiving something unknown even to Adam and Eve: that there is a joy beyond the scope of Eden, a joy that 'was neither given, / Nor could be given' there, namely,

> possession of the good
> Which had been sighed for, ancient thought fulfilled
> And dear Imaginations realized
> Up to their highest measure, yea and more.
>
> (ll. 106–9)

His paradise is expressly not Eden, but a 'grace' (l. 103) that comes to a world of deprivation and of time, and that infers a future to be reached for by thought and imagination. The idea is important as an intuition both of the purpose behind the loss of Eden – the creation of a more complex and maybe greater joy in a possible, further paradise – and of the process of the latter's achievement.

It is this gradual definition of paradise that leads to the familiar statement, at the end of *The Recluse*, of Wordsworth's task as a poet.[1] Indeed, what he says there too is that his concern is quite explicitly with paradise not as something only 'departed' or as a 'mere fiction' but as a virtuality of the present, a 'simple produce of the common day' (ll. 50–5). The stress here is clearly on the fact that, however simple it may be and however common its source, paradise does have to be produced. If the actual Grasmere were already paradise, Wordsworth's job would be to enable others to live in similarly ideal surroundings, and poetry would hardly come into it. Yet it is precisely poetry that is lacking. Perfect natural place is not enough, and, despite the 'repose' of Grasmere's blended holiness, his living there does not provide 'perfect rest' (l. 685), because of a 'something within' (l. 687), which is not only inordinate ambition (though I

assume it is that too) but the life of his mind and his need for poetry. A source of his writing, as maybe of all writing, is an elation before the world, a dissatisfaction, and a desire to intervene.

For true paradise would be, for Wordsworth, a creation from nature and mind together, and it can occur (to return to the 'Prospectus') since the 'Soul of universal earth' is human, and since that Soul may be inspired by the Spirit when 'Dreaming on things to come' (ll. 83–5). There is an unembarrassed ambitiousness here that may now seem remote, and in particular a sense of human lordship and power, which is essential to Wordsworth's poetics though lost in the false modesty of our sundry atheisms and modernised christianities. Not, to be sure, that Wordsworth's position is necessarily Christian. It does accord, nevertheless, with that of, say, Sidney, who asks early in the 'Apology for Poetry' that it be not 'deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature', since God, having 'made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over' all His works. Wordsworth's apparently inordinate claim that the imagination can review the world could be justified, in a Christian perspective, by the notion that Adam, knowing the earth through having been formed 'of the dust of the ground' (Genesis 2:7), has been given the task of naming it and, since the Fall, presumably renaming it (2:19); and even the declaration in the final lines of *The Prelude* that the human mind is more than the earth for being 'Of quality and fabric more divine', is simply a startling reading and reaffirmation of the Hebraic teaching.

So paradise would be achieved when the human intellect is 'wedded' to the universe (ll. 52–3), in a perfect blend of reality and transcendence, a paradise that is earthly and an earth that is paradisal. It is for the future, and can only be 'dreamt' in the present; its coming is named as 'the blissful hour' and the 'great consummation' (ll. 56–8). The function of poetry, therefore, is first to discern a paradisal quality in nature, which I take to be what Wordsworth means by 'Beauty' (l. 42), and then, perceiving that this is not the end, to change nature by the power of the imagination, to marry it to the human mind and chant the 'spousal verse' (l. 57). Two other poets seem to be present at this decisive moment of definition: Spenser and Sidney. Spenser is introduced as the author of 'Prothalamion, or A Spousal Verse', so that Wordsworth can define the whole of his epic project as the poetry of wedding, with the admired Spenser as one of its patrons.[2] If Sidney enters, however,

it is for the purpose of a quite subtle debate. The question is the relation between reality and poetry, and this is Wordsworth's view:

> – Beauty – a living Presence of the earth,
> Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms
> Which craft of delicate Spirits hath composed
> From earth's materials – waits upon my steps;
> Pitches her tents before me as I move,
> An hourly neighbour.
>
> (ll. 42–7)

Sidney, on the other hand, in exalting the poet's craft, argues that he makes 'things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature', and that 'Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done'. Notice how carefully Wordsworth distinguishes. He celebrates earthly beauty not, as one might have expected, against poetry created in a flight from the earth – towards forms such as never were in Nature – as if *that* waywardness were obvious; but against forms composed from the materials of the earth, where, since he is to declare that his own poetry will be of that kind, the stress must fall on 'ideal', and no doubt on 'Forms'. Sidney too assumes that the poet, though 'not enclosed within the narrow warrant' of Nature's gifts, nevertheless 'goeth hand in hand with Nature', so that Wordsworth's new emphasis is on the poet's practice of reality, a recognition of the 'living Presence' of the earth to be experienced closely as an 'hourly neighbour', through the medium of one's bodily activity, where, instead of a figurative going hand in hand, one actually 'steps' and 'moves'. He would certainly agree that poetry derived from that neighbouring produces the earth in a richer tapestry, but by adding that he will use words 'Which speak of nothing more than what we are' (l. 59) he distances himself from what he seems to see as the danger of Sidney's emphasis, expressed in the notion that 'right poets' borrow 'nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be'.

* * *

The discerning of transcendence and the exploration of the conditions for a 'spousal verse' are the concern in particular of *The*

Prelude. The two are not separate, in fact: intimations of the source of poetry and of its power in the world are also moments when a perceived reality is overborne by a reality of vision. This is clear in the opening lines:

> O there is a blessing in this gentle breeze,
> A visitant that while he fans my cheek
> Doth seem half-conscious of the joy he brings
> From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.[3]

In this marvellous beginning, Wordsworth takes the ancient idea of an inspirational *afflatus* and relocates it, first, in a wind blowing in the north of England. Nature itself becomes the power moving on the poet, and the physicality of inspiration is strangely stressed. Since the breeze 'fans my cheek' (it 'beats against my cheek' in 1805), it also suggests another physical activity associated with poetry, that of the breath blowing inside the cheeks in the making and saying of verse. The whole poem begins, indeed, with the lips shaping as for breath so as to form 'O'. Even the later reference to an inner inspiration claims that this 'correspondent breeze' too was felt 'while the sweet breath of heaven / Was blowing on my body' (ll. 33–5).[4] The physicality in itself need not surprise (a vivid passage in a letter of 24 December 1799, which relates to line 453 of *The Prelude*, runs: 'I have procured a pair of skates and tomorrow mean to give my body to the wind'), only the practice of the body as a channel for poetry.

Yet there is still of course something more than natural in the wind, which contains a 'blessing', and which comes, in a detail absent from the 1805 text, as a 'visitant'. Without exactly being the Spirit or Breath of God, the wind alludes to him with a kind of 'as if'. When the sweet breath of heaven blows on Wordsworth's body, moreover, 'sweet' and 'blowing' and 'body' play against the other, religious meaning of 'heaven', to evoke an experience poised between the senses and the spirit, as if heaven – just at the moment when he refers to the inward breeze of creativity – were almost touching the body, or the body were almost in touch with heaven. Wordsworth intimates, I presume, a more than natural wholeness, where human feeling and imagination, a natural wind and also a spiritual wind, from both earth and sky, meet in a corporeal jubilation: a hint, it seems, of the wedding to come. He celebrates the interaction of one's body with the world's, and with something

in the world beyond the bodily, as the source of poetry; and he offers, as access to an inspiration that is personal ('he') and that 'comes' with a 'mission' (l. 5), specifically the sense of touch.

In these opening lines of *The Prelude* it is the urge to poetry itself that encounters a transcendence in the real; and their suggestiveness goes beyond the onset of inspiration, for the wind also alludes to the making and remaking of the world. A breeze occurring in the first line of a long poem clearly relates to the Spirit of God present at the very opening of the Bible (where he presides over an even vaster piece of writing to follow) as the agent of the Creation. The later comparison of the mind of the poet to a mother dove who 'Sits brooding' (l. 141) quotes Milton's version, in the proem of *Paradise Lost*, of the same Spirit moving creatively on the face of the waters. And doesn't the exclamation: 'I breathe again!' (l. 18), recall God breathing into Adam's nostrils the breath of life? The beginning of *The Prelude* is the beginning of a world. The reality to come is modified, however, by the famous reference, in 'The earth is all before me' (l. 14), to Milton's statement about Adam and Eve as they leave Eden, that 'The world was all before them': it advances Wordsworth a stage further, to being an Adam entering on a fallen world; while the fact that such an auspicious line at the opening of his epic joins with another at the very end of Milton's implies quite overtly that *The Prelude* is to be, if not his *Paradise Regained*, his move towards it. The ensuing poem, inspired by the breeze, will be an attempt not to create but to recreate the earth – or rather, a probing of the means of its recreation; and since the origin of the poem is the experience of a world both natural and more than natural, the paradise to be aspired to is likely to be similarly poised between the two.

It is also remarkable just how allusive this opening section is, as a glance through the notes in critical editions will confirm. As well as further references to *Paradise Lost*, there are others to *Areopagitica* and, later, to 'L'Allegro', 'Lycidas', and Milton's sonnet on his blindness, while the liftings from Genesis are accompanied by others from Exodus. There is an echo, also later, of *The Faerie Queene*. It is a kind of quotation literature, full of intertextual activity (especially in the clusters of allusions at ll. 7–8 and 14–18), and the experience of reading it is not so different, in this perspective, from reading Pope. And don't the first lines also recall the beginning of Spenser's 'Prothalamion'? It too opens with a 'gentle breeze':

> Calm was the day, and through the trembling air
> Sweet-breathing Zephyrus did softly play
> A gentle spirit

– itself an echo of the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales*. It too tells of a man who has escaped from a city or court, where he was 'discontented', to the joy of nature:

> When I (whom sullen care,
> Through discontent of my long fruitless stay
> In prince's court, and expectation vain
> Of idle hopes, which still do fly away,
> Like empty shadows, did afflict my brain),
> Walked forth to ease my pain ...

The Prelude announces itself as a 'spousal verse'; the breeze that inspires Wordsworth comes also from a tradition of English poetry.

One sees why the wind is the border from one realm to another. It is not only that many languages play across 'breath', 'wind' and 'spirit', so that in the Bible, for instance, the Spirit is also the Breath or the Wind of God, and Jesus, when likening the Spirit to the wind in the third chapter of John's Gospel, uses, even according to the Greek translation, the same word for each. The wind is surely a threshold to the invisible world since it is already invisible; it almost belongs to that world through its invisibility, while it belongs to this through its effects. Something of the genuine – the natural – mystery of the wind is caught in the reference back to the correspondent breeze and to the heavenly breath as the inspirer of the poet, in the opening of Book VII:

> my favourite grove,
> Tossing in sunshine its dark boughs aloft,
> As if to make the strong wind visible,
> Wakes in me agitations like its own,
> A spirit friendly to the Poet's task.
>
> (ll. 44–8)

One senses nature straining through darkness to give entry to the strong wind of the spirit, the 'rushing mighty wind' of Pentecost.

That initial exploration of the source of poetry is pursued in the same and in later books in a number of passages that are linked to each other as it were subliminally. A series of refocusings, they show Wordsworth not expounding a theory but continually re-entering an experience, so as to search, develop and deepen it. The first is the bird-nesting episode in Book I:

> Oh! when I have hung
> Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
> And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
> But ill-sustained, and almost (so it seemed)
> Suspended by the blast that blew amain,
> Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
> While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
> With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
> Blow through my ear! the sky seemed not a sky
> Of earth – and with what motion moved the clouds!
>
> (ll. 330–9)

Not only does the wind recur (winds blow, of course, throughout the poem), but the phrasing and the lineation of 'did the loud dry wind / Blow through my ear' recall 'the sweet breath of heaven / Was blowing on my body', as a kind of mnemonic. The wind has changed utterly, but is still personal ('Shouldered') and still mysterious; and the poet senses that mystery once again through touch, as the blast suspends him in the air, or rather, in his own very precise wording, suspends him 'almost (so it seemed)'. The brackets are not without interest. The text in 1805 read: 'almost, as it seemed / Suspended', and was already doubly tentative; the parenthesis adds a further recession of doubt, but it also adds, along with an affirmation from the present that it did seem so, an isolated pocket of consciousness endeavouring to recapture how it felt. The doubt is not, moreover, finally dismissive: it doesn't register, surely, the adult's realisation that the fancy was appropriate to the scared boy but that we know better. For one thing, the brackets are followed, not preceded, by what they question, and the supreme assertiveness of 'Suspended by the blast', along with the sustained alliterative confidence, runs counter to that questioning. The strangeness of the wind also carries through, into its speaking, into a sky that, admittedly, 'seemed' not to be a sky of earth (itself an

unwonted expression, emphasised by the line-break), and into an unknown motion in the clouds. The blast did not 'suspend' the boy in any ordinary sense, but then ordinary sense is not alone in operation here. One only needs to catch the excitement of the lines to know that Wordsworth is registering, in all seriousness, an intuition, not of a supernatural world quite different from ours, but of the real world become, to the senses of the imagination, astonishingly and overmasteringly other. The sky turns – almost – to heaven, the wind is the breath, as it were, of Spirit, and the mere movements of clouds, no longer a simple matter of fact, look as if they occur in a natural scene transfigured.

The earlier wind that met in particular his cheek was silent, whereas the wind that now reaches 'through' his ear speaks with a 'strange utterance'. That strangeness derives from the unworldly quality of the breath that delivers it; what he hears is inarticulate speech from the earth and seemingly from beyond the earth, as he hangs on a 'perilous ridge' at the earth's end. And although he is writing of himself as a nine-year-old, isn't poetry again in question? Unlike the natural 'voices' that he hears elsewhere as a child, the utterance of the wind or spirit is almost a language, to be reached for, remembered. Here is a further encounter with a source of poetry, where the body is once again the medium of inspiration; and the sense that makes him sensitive is now that of hearing.

This is not the only language that he hears, and to evoke the other he again rewrites the passage (I am not referring to the chronological order of composition), in the next book:

> I would walk alone,
> Under the quiet stars, and at that time
> Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound
> To breathe an elevated mood, by form
> Or image unprofaned; and I would stand,
> If the night blackened with a coming storm,
> Beneath some rock, listening to notes that are
> The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
> Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
> Thence did I drink the visionary power.
>
> (II 302–11)

He is once more, though not surprisingly, alone; the wind returns, as does the rock; the strange utterance has become a ghostly language; a sky 'not of earth' is recalled in stars above an almost equally unfamiliar 'ancient earth'. The language is again difficult to define. As a language of the earth it may hark back to notions of telluric oracles, like that at Delphi. Is it possible, however, that 'ancient', especially when allied with 'ghostly', 'distant' and 'visionary', means, as in French, 'former' as well as 'old', and refers to Eden? We know from elsewhere in *The Prelude* of Wordsworth's belief in the availability, to special perception, of something surviving from an Edenic origin. When Coleridge goes to Sicily for his health, Wordsworth questions whether there may not be some place in the vale of Enna 'From the first play-time of the infant world / Kept sacred to restorative delight' (XI 420–1). It is notable that the unfallen earth resembles the unfallen child of 'Intimations of Immortality', being described as an infant, and that its function in a fallen world is to restore; it is also notable that the text of 1850 adds the line 'When from afar invoked by anxious love', as if to emphasise the distance and the unease from which we perceive Eden. Indeed, it may be that a reference in the 1805 *Prelude* to 'breezes and soft airs that breathe / The breath of paradise' (XI 10–11) was removed because of the absence of any difficulty of access; while the lines: 'Earth, nowhere unembellished by some trace / Of that first Paradise whence man was driven' (III 111–12), were added for the 1850 text to confirm the presence of an Edenic 'trace' while acknowledging our exile from Eden itself. Without such glimpses of a 'first' paradise there would be no conceiving of a second, and without that exclusion there would be no incitement to achieve it.

If this is the language of Eden, the former earth, it is no doubt ghostly in part because it haunts the place as the language of paradise lost. It is also *geistlich* or 'spiritual', and so relates once again to the no longer silent wind. As a language both ghostly and 'of the earth', moreover, it exists between earthiness and ghostliness, between matter and spirit; like the 'strange utterance' of the previous book, it is already at once real and transcendent. Not merely disembodied, it resembles the natural yet also unnatural 'distant winds' in being the passage to the invisible.

The passage is specifically, and curiously, sound. Sound is described here, by hyperbole and with some provocation, as creating a mood 'unprofaned' by form or image, as if sound were sacred, an

elevation into a temple to which the merely visual has no access. Yet the ear does not withdraw from the rest of the body: hearing gathers into itself both sight, at the point where the latter fails, since the notes make a 'dim' abode in distant winds, and breath, since, through a bold adynaton, sound is said to have the power to 'breathe' an elevated mood. The suggestion seems to be that the body, listening to these rare sounds, itself changes rarely, so as to become to kind of transfigured hearing.

Sound and hearing, in fact, are often mysterious in Wordsworth, part of the broad mystery of matter and of the senses. In the well known passage about stealing a bird from someone else's snare that immediately precedes the bird-nesting in Book I, the boy Wordsworth hears 'sounds / Of undistinguishable motion, steps / Almost as silent as the turf they trod' (ll. 323–5). Invisible motion is perceived through sounds that are scarcely audible, steps that almost share the silence of the turf, 'low breathings' numinous for being on the brim of soundlessness. Extraordinarily sensitive to the body's relations, Wordsworth is concerned for the passing not only of the visible to the invisible but, on this occasion at least, of the audible to the inaudible.

In the lines we are considering, sound is said, again provocatively, to afford 'visionary power', it being clear that vision is not physical seeing and may therefore be induced by another sense. It is accompanied, in fact, by an obfuscation of sight, in the 'dim' distance, and Wordsworth emphasises this in the following lines by figurative references to moods of 'shadowy' exultation (l. 313) and to an 'obscure' sense of possible sublimity (l. 317). The revision of the passage also carefully confined such experiences to the night, and added the allusion to the night blackening. Isn't this because darkness is the natural accomplice of vision? – and even of sight, if one considers how little of the universe is visible during the daytime. A darkness has already reverberated with sound earlier in the same book, when a wren was heard in the nave of a ruined church:

> So sweetly 'mid the gloom the invisible bird
> Sang to herself, that there I could have made
> My dwelling-place.
>
> (II 125–7)

(Wordsworth's poetry is deeply, it seems, a search for 'dwelling', for 'abode'.) One remembers Milton's bird singing 'in shadiest covert hid' (III 39), and the bird songs of Eliot charged with similar meaning, and also, along with a change of sense, the equally liminal intuition, in 'The Dry Salvages', of the 'wild thyme unseen'. The wind is again present, and appropriately so, as 'Internal breezes' in the ruin, 'sobbings', and 'respirations from the roofless walls' (ll. 122–3). In a passage that becomes more elusive and suggestive the more one attends to it, the wind, as a natural and also more than natural breath, 'touches' the place, and in particular the 'shuddering' ivy (ll. 121, 124).

What Wordsworth hears, it seems, is a ghostly language of before the earth as we know it, and a strange utterance from beyond the earth, or from the beyond of the earth. Both are the speech of a spirit-like breath, blowing in a world momentarily transfigured, and entering a human body similarly wrought upon. One might again think of Eliot; but whereas Eliot in *Ash-Wednesday* names, as the 'ancient rhyme' and the 'new verse', the two human languages – of paradise lost and of paradise regained – between which one's own language is inevitably strung as a kind of 'cry', Wordsworth listens to the signs of those languages in the natural world, discovering their source in the inspiring wind.

* * *

The move from the hearing of those wind-borne languages to the writing of his own language in the verse of *The Prelude* is described in a moment of pause in the next book, when he claims to 'make', according to a sudden and difficult phrase, 'Breathings for incommunicable powers' (III 190). The powers are partly within, and they are incommunicable, says the passage, because there are points in each of our souls where 'all stand single'. What occurs there 'lies far hidden from the reach of words', despite the poet's desire to touch it 'With hand' – no doubt writing-hand – 'however weak', so that the breathings which serve as its thoroughfare to the reader seem, while retaining the old sense of 'utterances', to be literal breathings, articulations of awareness more inward than the articulations of language. Since that withinness is a 'soul', moreover, and Wordsworth's theme is 'the might of souls', poetry becomes the breathing of the soul, the uttering or outering of the soul in breath. And not only of the individual soul: earlier lines have

referred to the material world as lying 'in a quickening soul' and as 'respir[ing] with inward meaning' (ll. 134–5), and have recorded the feeling of 'Incumbencies more awful, visitings / Of the Upholder of the tranquil soul' (ll. 119–20). Poetry is where the breathing of the world, felt by the poet in 'visitings' like those of the inspiring breeze of the poem's opening lines, is made perceptible to others. It incorporates a breathing world into its own breathing.

Wordsworth is making a bold application, to an aspect of the physicality of poetry, of the idea of *anima mundi*, or world-soul. And what he says is not without point for anyone, and I imagine that includes most of us, to whom the idea is alien. In a Christian perspective, the creation is, after all, in part the work of the Spirit, and might not improperly be understood as breathing (Wordsworth calls 'Nature's self' the 'breath of God' in line 221 of Book V); while scripture actually declares itself to be *theópneustos*, or God-inspired (2 Timothy 3:16). It is true that no other writings, even the most deeply Christian, can be made a breathing for the Spirit, who 'blows where he lists'. Yet they may be 'spiritual' in this sense by desire or by analogy: they may, that is, by their renewal of the literal breathing of writer and reader, be the sign of a transformed body renewed by spirit. And since wind is both physical and almost-transcendent, a glimpse of the invisible, perhaps poetry too may be liminal, with its breathing actually relating the movements of the lungs to the movements of a more than physical wind. Certainly, in Christian terms, the body of a poem does resemble the body of a man, and the body of the world, straining not to become discarnate but to go beyond themselves, into a condition not unlike that of the resurrection, described by St Paul as the raising of 'spiritual bodies' (1 Corinthians 15:44).

One realises, and not for the first time in Wordsworth's poetry, that the literal is merging into the figurative. In one sense, the phrase about breathings is presumably a statement as to how he wrote blank verse, with 'I make' recalling the earlier designation of the poet as maker, and if it refers to his releasing the suggestiveness of words, it also alludes to his control of his own and his reader's breath, by the deployment of stress, syntax, pause, mouth movement. At the same time, that partly physiological breathing registers the breathing of a world, which is itself physical in so far as the world breathes through the wind, but which is also figurative in that the world 'respires' with meaning, and the winds are quasi-spiritual. As the real in Wordsworth meets the transcendent

in the act of imagination, isn't a deep intent of his poetry to cause the hitherto distinct rhetorical domains of the literal and the figurative to join in the act of writing?

The incommunicable powers, though certainly internalised, begin, as I suggested, as powers beyond him. This is the passage where Wordsworth resumes and asserts his theme:

> Of genius, power,
> Creation and divinity itself
> I have been speaking, for my theme has been
> What passed within me,
>
> (ll. 173–6)

and uses the terms of Milton's self-justification to claim for it an epic status, as 'heroic argument' and the report of 'genuine prowess' (ll. 184–5). All the powers of *The Prelude* are involved in these breathings, and especially those that communicate with him through the utterance and language of the wind, so that by making verse he conveys the breath of inspiration into the breathings of poetry. They are the breathings, therefore, not of the world as it is (in Wordsworth the world rarely comes merely as it is) but of the world reaching towards change, of an earth that bears the trace of paradise and of a sky that is 'not a sky', and that, without exactly being Heaven, can nevertheless be so named (l. 114).

* * *

This authoritative knowledge of the mysteriousness of poetry, which took Wordsworth so far beyond Dryden and Pope, at least in their thinking about their art, continues into his reflection on words. For at the end of Book V, having meditated the origins of poetry, the languages that he hears, and the breathings by which he incorporates them in verse, he considers the power of verse, when inhabited itself by the inspiring winds, to effect changes in the world, and elicit paradise from the common day:

> Visionary power
> Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
> Embodied in the mystery of words:
> There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
> Of shadowy things work endless changes there,

> As in a mansion like their proper home.
> Even forms and substances are circumfused
> By that transparent veil with light divine,
> And, through the turnings intricate of verse,
> Present themselves as objects recognised,
> In flashes, and with glory not their own.
>
> (ll. 595–605)

This is surely a crucial passage in the history of thinking about the relation of words to things. (I discussed it briefly in *Towards a Christian Poetics*.) Yet again, it is the rewriting of a previous passage, the one in Book II about the language of the earth. In each, one enters an obscurity, where the notes that one attempts to hear 'make their dim abode' in distant winds or 'darkness makes abode' in the words of poetry that try to capture those winds, while, perhaps as a mnemonic, a 'shadowy exultation' is recalled in a host of 'shadowy things'. What is in question in both cases is 'visionary power', in the first derived for the poet from a ghostly language and from distant winds, in the second present within the poem, in the workings of words and the motions of 'viewless winds'. 'Viewless', one of a number of pointed changes introduced into the 1850 text, marks the final stage in the winds' role. Already agents of vision in nature and on one's body, through being the frontier to the invisible, they now penetrate words to become the agents of vision in poetry.

In taking up and developing one of the earliest parts of *The Prelude* to be composed, the lines alter the focus, from an encounter in what the immediately previous lines call 'living Nature' to an experience of 'the great Nature that exists in works / Of mighty Poets'. And what they say apropos of those works is that verse transforms the world. As objects and their words enter poetry, and in particular the 'turnings intricate' of verse, they are modified, being caught up into a pattern of semantics, of sounds, of syntax. 'Turnings' is in fact a pleonasm, or it involves a kind of etymological pun, since a 'verse' is already a turning, a furrow-like back-tracking from line to line; and the close attention to the word appears to have prompted a further pun, so that, as the lines turn technically, they also turn or convert the objects to which they refer. The changes wrought on things are also reflexed in the changes, the exploratory ploys and plays, that are wrought on words. As I suggested in my earlier discussion, the insights of Mallarmé are anticipated here, and specifically his

notion, in 'Variations on a Theme', that a line of verse, in constituting a 'new word', alters the thing that it connotes, so that 'the reminiscence of the named object bathes in a new atmosphere'.

Doesn't the over-all shaping of *The Prelude* work similarly? It too turns this way and that, changing its materials by the new lights being thrown on them and changing its lines by rewriting them in different perspectives. The microcosmic 'turnings intricate' of verse are even implicitly related to the macrocosmic structure of the poem as a whole at the beginning of Book IX, when Wordsworth (in a revision) describes what he has written so far as having 'Turned and returned with intricate delay' (l. 8).

Verse is also being established as a special place, a 'there' whose adverb is repeated for emphasis even more powerfully than in the lines about the church and the singing wren ('there I could have made/My dwelling-place, and lived for ever there', II 126–7); while the changes produced in it are, according to another significant revision, 'endless'. They reflect continually on one another and, rather than presenting the world transformed once and for all, the poetry endlessly prosecutes the changes of a world whose renewal into paradise is for the future. The lines send one back yet again to the dimly heard language of Book II. Although it was recorded in an act of memory, and came from a past of the world even more remote than the past of the poet, because of Wordsworth's understanding of the creative power of memory it too opened exhilaratingly to the future, though to a future likewise withdrawing continuously from attainment: through the growth of its faculties, he wrote, the soul feels that 'whatsoever point they gain, they yet/Have something to pursue' (ll. 321–2). The lines also look forward to the celebrated passage in Book VI (which is, indeed, another rewriting, with lines 599 to 602 especially being a lacing together of words and phrases from the end of Book V), where the imagination, revealing the invisible world, reveals also that our 'destiny', being with 'infinitude', is with 'something evermore about to be' (l. 608).

The process is also a traversing of darkness towards light. The darkness is no doubt in part the puzzlement of the reader, his necessary difficulty in penetrating the mystery of change; for the light is described overtly as 'divine', and 'glory' has obvious heavenly connotations, while forms and substances seem to be 'circumfused' as with an aureole or nimbus. Also perplexing is the apparent reference, in the 'viewless winds', to Claudio's speech,

'Ay, but to die, and go we know not where', in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Is it that Claudio's terror of what may happen –

> To be imprison'd in the viewless winds
> And blown with restless violence round about
> The pendent world ...
>
> (III i 123–5)

– although it envisages winds quite different from those of Wordsworth, supplies the passage with the hint of death? If that is so, the objects of the world enter darkness so as to die metaphorically in the 'there' of verse, with a view to rising again into a heavenly light and being seen anew as if they were in paradise. The process, most fundamental of all, would be of death and resurrection.

Because the winds are invisible, the poetry is visionary, and creates a power in the reader to pass beyond ordinary sight. Poetry, one might say, blinds the reader (as painting deafens and paralyses the viewer), so as to alter his seeing. The merely 'glittering' verse (l. 591) by which the young are attracted differs therefore from the 'light' of the highest poetry – as 'glitt'ring Thoughts' in Pope differ from the solar light of true expression – since this enables one to see figuratively, to perceive, that is, not another world but this world transmuting. The transmutations are nevertheless profound. Although objects are 'recognised', since their reminiscence has entered the poem, and maybe since they are the shapes of the everyday and not the furniture of Arcady or Atlantis, they are also recognised in a more novel sense of the word – with a certain amazement and awe, through and despite their change, their newness – since the glory that invests them, according to yet another probing revision, is 'not their own'. Once again, however, the change is not final. Even if the recognition, as one might conclude from 'Intimations of Immortality', were of the celestial world of childhood or before, the objects of its ken present themselves not in the steady light of paradise but only in 'flashes'.

Verse is also described as a veil; and Wordsworth is surely right to imply that words veil rather than show, their role being not to describe a world merely given but, if it is a world excluded from Eden in expectation of Paradise, to conceal it in such a way as to change its appearance. 'Transparent veil' is in fact formidably

precise: almost an oxymoron, it suggests both our no longer quite seeing the object when poetry has intervened, and our seeing yet not seeing the object as transformed in the poem. As we look, not 'through a glass, darkly' but through a transparency, veiled, we catch, by flashes, a kind of other radiance. It may even intimate the veil of the temple. This was not transparent, to be sure, and at Jesus's death it was not made transparent but was rent. In Wordsworth's context, however, it does seem to mean that one might pass, through the veil of verse, if not to the holy of holies, at least to an earth become heavenly.

For, according to a related metaphor, verse is also a 'mansion', and a place, for the agents of inspiration that have come to dwell there and work their changes, 'like their proper home'. And what should that home be but heaven? – the Father's house, in Jesus's expression, where there are 'many mansions' (John 14:2). The poetry where they shed their light is therefore a similitude of heaven, and once more a locus for viewing familiar objects as if they were in paradise.

One senses here the large things that loom from small linguistic details, and human language as no less 'strange' or 'ghostly' than languages from the extremes of nature. And there is more. To add a final weave of complexity, doesn't the underlying figuration of the passage relate the activities of verse to a particular religious ceremony? That the winds should be 'embodied' hints at incarnation, while the word 'mystery', through its association with 'sacrament', focuses that incarnation in the communion. The thought is strengthened by 'changes', despite the plural, and by 'substances', with its history in theological speculation about the substances and accidents of the bread and wine, especially when those substances appear with a 'glory not their own'. In such company, even the prefix in 'transparent', following close after, may call up 'transsubstantiation', and 'host' evoke its eucharistic homonym. The 'transparent veil', while not a biblical or theological term (though a transparent veil does cover the remains of the consecrated elements), insinuates the bread and the wine as veil for the body and blood of Christ. Death and resurrection are again in the shadows.

In this prodigious passage, therefore, Wordsworth seems to have used a Catholic-tinged doctrine of a miraculous changing of ordinary objects – objects, indeed, of 'the common day' – as a way of referring to his main theme here: the changing of the objects of the

world in poetry. As he describes change, moreover, he inevitably effects it. The very elusiveness of the writing, the 'darkness' for the reader as he reaches for hints about the communion and for moves in a complex theory, is an index of the depths of both the mysteries, the religious and also the poetic.

* * *

This passage in Book V, as it declares the mystery and intricacy of words, is itself intensely mysterious and intricate. (It repays the closest reading, even to significant sound effects like 'Embodied ... abode', and suggests that there is a density of writing in Wordsworth for which he is not always given credit, especially as the density here is different in kind from the allusiveness of the opening of Book I.) We have encountered, indeed, recesses of strangeness in all Wordsworth's probing of inspiration and imagination, of a poem's rapport with the world at large and of its ability to rework that world; a strangeness which is partly corporeal. For the body that meets with wind also meets, over and again, almost with spirit, through touch, through hearing. Sight becomes vision, the literal merges into the figurative, and the senses 'sense' what is beyond them. To register a change in the world, the body itself changes; and one recalls a passage in 'Tintern Abbey', where Wordsworth refers, as if we all knew it, to

> that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul.
>
> (ll. 42–7)

The body is not cast aside in this experience, so that the soul can achieve excarnation: one is still 'in body', and the motions of body, including those of the breath, have been not suspended but 'almost suspended' – have been taken, one might say, to the verge of the physical. One is 'laid asleep', and to be asleep is not to cease breathing but to breathe differently and more profoundly, and under the sway of something beyond consciousness. The quotation

from Genesis: 'and man became a living soul' (2:7), suggests indeed that if, in this suspension, 'We see into the life of things' (l. 50), it is because there has been breathed into us, as into Adam, 'the breath of life'. Without actually saying so, and without even naming the divine breath, the lines hint at the possibility of the latter almost superseding, mastering, our own breath. They evoke a relation of body, mind and spirit, and they do so with a realism that one can find powerfully suggestive in terms of Christian practice. One also realises that the experience they so subtly enact might not be so different from death.

I feel the pressure here of the passage in Edward Young's *Night-Thoughts* from which I quoted in the previous chapter. Wordsworth did not only use, later in 'Tintern Abbey', Young's phrase about the senses 'half creating' the perceptual world; he also seems to have lighted on Young's statement that the senses, like reason, are 'divine', on the way to developing his own understanding of the mind as reaching for divinity not beyond the senses and the natural world but through their transformation. Young's revalorising of the body is in any case an important perspective on the kind of transcendence, of possibility, that I am considering.

A work that explores its own origins, relations, and powers, *The Prelude* is also greatly suggestive, should you be interested, for a more specifically Christian poetics, beyond what I have already drawn out or implied. As is well known, Wordsworth secularised the theology of apocalypse so as to view the recreation of the world as an act of imagination, in which the mind rises above a material reality by virtue of its more divine fabric. If one reasserts apocalypse within his perspective, what the imagination sees, or may see, is the world being remade from elsewhere, by God – becoming other and, more importantly, belonging to Another – as a foresight of the sudden and final remaking, the establishing of 'new heavens and a new earth'. It could be argued, in fact, that recreative poetry can only exist because a Recreation will in truth occur; and also that, without such a Recreation, there is actually no substance to be given to the 'blissful hour', the 'great consummation', to which, for Wordsworth, writing is the prelude. It could even be maintained that only the Recreation enables one to distinguish a real encounter with a transcendental change in the world beyond the self, entailing a real change within the self, from an encounter with the capacities of one's own imagination.

Wordsworth likewise secularises, in his metaphor of a wedding of the mind with a world become paradise, the doctrine of the church as the bride of Christ. Here too a more literally Christian poetics might wish to bring the two weddings into relation. Isn't an experience of a world changing, an experience, for the Christian writer, of Christ Himself – who upholds that world and is the only master of change – and one of the foretastes of the final wedding? Or if it is not, shouldn't it be? And isn't that contact with Christ, in his death, his resurrection, his return, ultimately what ensures that one is not alone with one's imagination? It obliges one to sustain the pressure not only of a resistant world, whose recreation, one realises, can only be on God's terms, but of another person.

6

Hopkins and 'the World's Wildfire'

So it will be useful to consider Hopkins. For Hopkins did see the activity of the poem in the light of a final remaking of the world, and he did understand poetry as an encounter with a personal otherness. It is not a question of using Hopkins's poetics somehow to correct or amend Wordsworth's, but of studying what that poetics can look like in action, especially since Hopkins was working in a period when such confidence and such declarativeness were becoming progressively more difficult.

One can start at the beginning:

> Thou mastering me
> God! giver of breath and bread;
> World's strand, sway of the sea;
> Lord of living and dead;
> Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
> And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
> Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
> Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

If one didn't know what was to follow, and without the biblical echoes, one might take this opening stanza of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' for an ejaculation of the Pythia at Delphi. Someone, having been almost unmade by a supernatural visitation, is being mastered, and fingered once again by the deity. His or her throes or writhings almost, through the uneven lines, the labouring stresses and enjambments, the mouth-working alliterations, the rhetorical changes of exclamation, statement, question, can make one think, now, of Valéry's 'La Pythie' (in *Charmes*), and are an even closer mimesis than his of an invasion by a god. God's priest, no less than Apollo's priestess, is being wrought and prepared.

The enactment, in the language and movement of the verse, of an onset of inspiration is all the more striking in that this is the first major work in which Hopkins tried his 'new rhythm', and which now stands at the head of his *Poems*. The stanza also reaches for what he clearly wants to be the source of his writing, and is an invocation: his first word, remarkably, is 'Thou'. (It is also God, or Christ, who has the last word – of the stanza: 'thee', of the first part of the poem: 'King', and of the poem as a whole: 'Lord'.) For as he is taken over as a poet, so the God on whom he calls is specifically the 'giver of breath and bread'. His second line acknowledges that the breath of poetry comes, for him, from God; and in 'bread' there may be a further suggestion. Does it call up the Old Testament verse that Jesus quotes at the devil during the temptation in the wilderness, to the effect that a man's real life is not 'bread alone' but 'every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4)? If so, God is being seen from the beginning as the origin of the breath and also of the words of poetry.

Hopkins is rehearsing a relationship to God which is not, of course, confined to inspiration, to his being a poet: what is mastered is 'me'. He is placing poetry in the wider context of the person – writing, of the life – as he is also placing it in the context of a deeper saying and a deeper silence. The second stanza: 'I did say yes / O at lightning and lashed rod', refers back to an experience of conversion or vocation, and in particular to a 'confessing' that was 'truer than tongue'. 'Yes' is the 'best ... word' (stanza 8) to return to a God whose Christ is the Word; while the confession precedes the inspiration and seems to be its necessary forerunner. The poem will be a long searching and articulating of the *yes*, and an attempt to utter a confession as true as can be. Because the 'yes' and the 'confess' already exist (it is Hopkins who makes them rhyme), the poet is in a position, according to the third stanza, to 'tell'. If confession is 'truer than tongue', however, so God, in the terms of the ninth stanza, is 'past telling of tongue'. There remains a telling of which no poet is capable. In all these details, Hopkins is scrupulously feeling his way on this side and on that of his poem, in this 'Part the first' which is so much more than a proem to the wreck of the *Deutschland*. His poem is partly about itself, not because he has swallowed a school of criticism but because he wants to see the limits of his poetry and its relation to everything that matters to him; and also because language has for him the kind of consequence about which it is impossible to exaggerate.

Note, in passing, that Hopkins is presenting his stanzas as the record of what actually happened to him in the past and even of what is happening to him in the present, whereas we should be far more comfortable with the notion that he is miming, creating – writing – a strictly fictive encounter with 'inspiration' and with God. The thinking of subsequent poets, as well as critical methods from the New Criticism to deconstruction, combine with the older tradition of rhetoric to make one mistrust the intervening, Romantic, assumption about directness of utterance, and rightly so. I discussed the matter in connection with Milton. The problem is that they don't equip us to deal with the idea of poetry as witness.

The concern with poetry continues into the second part of the poem, despite the fact that attention shifts from Hopkins to the *Deutschland*. For Hopkins has a muse, and the muse is the 'tall nun' on the ship. Immediately after his first mention of her, he addresses his 'heart':

> Ah, touched in your bower of bone
> Are you! turned for an exquisite smart,
> Have you! make words break from me here all alone,
> Do you! – mother of being in me, heart.
>
> (st. 18)

This does in fact bring Hopkins before the reader again, who is not allowed to forget that the poem is being written, that someone is 'telling' the event. His heart, as the 'mother' of being in him, is clearly related to the nun, and it is partly she who gives him utterance, in a solitude like and yet also very unlike her own. She has 'touched' him as the inspiring God touched him in the opening stanza, and by making words 'break' from him she recalls the more inward breaking, the near 'unmaking' of God's 'doing', that was the prelude there to true speech. The poem is preoccupied, over and again, with speaking, and specifically with having words forced out of one.

The nun can serve as muse because she is herself a kind of essential poetess, having penetrated to the place where, according to Hopkins, true speaking begins. Her presentation is startling. She is first a 'lioness' (stanza 17), and the metaphor doesn't stop at the point where it suggests her power, perhaps the strength of her voice, or even her strangeness to the others in the shipwreck. In

becoming finally and exactly herself, as a 'prophetess' (17), a martyr, a witness from the cross, she also goes further than herself, and enters a state for which only a very appropriate but also a quite sudden and inappropriate word – 'a lioness arose' – will do. From there, what she does most evidently is to enact language:

> Till a lioness arose breasting the babble,
> A prophetess towered in the tumult, a virginal tongue told.

She is a voice opposing the babble of a world in tumult, and she seems to repeat within her own limitations the moment when Jesus, in another foundering ship to be referred to in stanza 25, also 'arose' and rebuked the winds and the sea. Her 'call' likewise 'rides over' the storm's 'brawling' in stanza 19, and in stanza 24 we are finally given the words that she uttered:

> She to the black-about air, to the breaker, the thickly
> Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and quails
> Was calling 'O Christ, Christ, come quickly':
> The cross to her she calls Christ to her, christens her wild-worst Best.

She re-echoes Hopkins's own words at the beginning of the poem in that her cry is an apostrophe, but in her apocalypse she also resounds with words from Revelation – with the last words, in fact, and so with the last words of the Bible. The brief poem-prophecy that breaks from her is a nucleation of the whole work, just as her finding herself at the quick of sacrifice is a nucleation, for Hopkins, of all experience. Which is why he uses the always potential punning of his alliterations to equate 'Christ' and 'the cross'; and why, astonishingly, when the nun addresses Christ he has her actually calling to the air, the sea and the snow, and to the desperate people around her. Her invocation does not by-pass the rest of the world: it passes through, gathers, and directs it.

She herself, moreover, is inspired: she 'read' the night and 'knew the who and the why',

> Wording it how but by him that present and past,
> Heaven and earth are word of, worded by?
>
> (st. 29)

The conventional theology of the world as the word of God has been made dynamic by the precision at the end, by the reaching, beyond the usual noun, for the activity of a verb. The verb is also in the present, and does not return to an archeological genesis. And there is urgency in the phrase 'how but by him ... ?' With a view even more radical than Milton's, Hopkins is making himself aware of the fact, and witnessing to it, that for the Christian poet there is no way around this, that his words are from God or not at all. Or rather, from Christ, for the next stanza develops the conceit that, like the Virgin Mary, the nun in her 'heart-throe' has given birth to the Word, by 'hearing' him and 'uttering' him. In the matter of inspiration as of so much else, Hopkins is remarkably Christ-ian.

To understand what it was that she encountered, he calls for inspiration for himself,

> The majesty! what did she mean?
> Breathe, arch and original Breath.
> Is it love in her of the being as her lover had been?
> Breathe, body of lovely Death.
>
> (st. 25)

One could write an essay on that last line alone, if one understood it. I presume that, as he closes with the possibility that Jesus actually appeared to the nun, at an extremity of experience, so Hopkins is trying to penetrate even further and with more and more precision to the source of understanding, to an extremity of inspiration. The first invocation asks for help in the manner of Milton, from a chief and founding Breath which seems to combine the Spirit of God who participated in the creation of the world (Genesis 1:2) with 'the breath of life' which was 'breathed' into Adam's nostrils to complete the creation of man (Genesis 2:7); from a Breath, that is, which is the origin of Hopkins and of his world. The second, however, swings vertiginously to Christ on the cross. The move from life to death is tense with wordplay, in the rhyming of 'Breath' with 'Death', and in the paradox of asking a dead body to 'breathe'. Hopkins is not a poet finally to have qualms about being extravagant, and in any case the cross is where a Christian poet can well see paradox culminating and seizing its profoundest significance. But 'what did he mean?' That in a fallen world the cross is the new prime and origin? That the centre and source of poetry is God

on the cross? And, for oneself, the experience of being likewise 'unmade' and remade, of dying and resurrecting? For Hopkins as for Milton, the self is in considerable danger in the act of poetry.

When he writes of being mastered and breathed into by God, Hopkins clearly means it: his sense of inspiration is the one we find embarrassing. He makes no concessions, though I presume that his way of understanding the matter can be interpreted by other writers according to their own perspective. Nor does he insist, of course, on always feeling a divine pressure on his writing. From his other poems, he seems to approach the job more or less like anyone else, trying to be open to all that is of most consequence, while bringing the whole of his living to bear, and, more singularly, trusting where he cannot command. Defining 'inspiration' in an admittedly very early letter of 10 September 1864, to A. W. M. Baillie, he is even satisfied with the modern psychological understanding: 'I mean by it a mood of great, abnormal in fact, mental acuteness, either energetic or receptive, according as the thoughts which arise in it seem generated by a stress and action of the brain, or to strike into it unasked.' He also made poems when he felt at a great distance from God, where the distance seems, not really surprisingly, to have been itself the impulse to write. He may well be referring to some of the so-called 'terrible' sonnets in a letter to Bridges of 1 September 1885, four of which 'came', according to the ancient meaning of the term, 'like inspirations unbidden and against my will'. This makes no difference to us as readers: if the poems succeed, we say of these 'dead letters' (to quote from 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day') that their 'lament' is nevertheless a lamentation, and that, with due seriousness, grief becomes a sonnet, despair rhymes, self-disgust scans, the curse alliterates.

* * *

Hopkins is a poet so obviously of *this* world. From his prose too one remembers the intent notations of things – the surprising yet accurate simile: 'Moonlight hanging or dropping on treetops like blue cobweb'; the remarking and inventive metaphoring of an event suddenly there and over, as of the 'shot of the neck' of pigeons: 'I saw one up on the eaves of the roof: as it moved its head a crush of satin green came and went, a wet or soft flaming of the light'.[1] In the same way his concern for what he called inscape was partly a desire to spell out the perceptual world. Writing in his journal (23

February 1872) of having seen a 'brindled heaven' and furry grey heads of trees and shrubs in the garden below, he concludes: 'I read a broad careless inscape flowing throughout'. He pores over the world, indeed, rather as over a not quite familiar language (with roughly the difficulty, perhaps, of the Greek choruses), as in this often quoted paragraph:

> About all the turns of the scaping from the break and flooding of the wave to its run out again I have not yet satisfied myself. The shores are swimming and the eyes have before them a region of milky surf but it is hard for them to unpack the huddling and gnarls of the water and law out the shapes and the sequence of the running: I catch however the looped or forked wisp made by every big pebble the backwater runs over – if it were clear and smooth there would be a network from their overlapping, such as can in fact be seen on smooth sand after the tide is out –; then I saw it run browner, the foam dwindling and twitched into long chains of suds, while the strength of the backdraught shrugged the stones together and clocked them one against another.
>
> (10 August 1872)

There is a link backwards here to Ruskin, and also forwards to Charles Tomlinson. 'The Atlantic', the opening poem of Tomlinson's first full-length collection, *Seeing is Believing*, has a similar combination of a delight in looking hard and a delight in finding the words for seeing.[2] An interesting term in the Hopkins, however, is 'law', and his ultimate concern seems to be to read, to reach, the divine government of the scene – the providence of the seen– by discovering laws to it other than those of science. He writes in another journal entry (where one might again think of Tomlinson while realising the differences): 'All the world is full of inscape and chance left free to act falls into an order as well as purpose: looking out of my window I caught it in the random clods and broken heaps of snow made by the cast of a broom' (24 February 1873).

For, though patient of reading, the physical universe, which *belongs*, is, especially in the poetry, anything but passive. 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God', says 'God's Grandeur', 'It will flame out', and I wonder whether Hopkins intended the marvellous, preposterous image of the universe as a loaded gun which fires God at us. (The poem also claims that nature is never 'spent'.) The more restrained sense, of course, is that the world is alive with a

kind of divine electricity, as in the corresponding passage from a devotional study: 'All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire'.[3] Those last words recall another famous opening line: 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame', which Hopkins packs with fiery activity, through the presence of 'dragon', through the kingfishers catching fire (intransitively) as they (transitively) catch the sun's fire, and perhaps through the dragonflies both attracting flame and also delineating flame on the air as with a paint-brush, by their precise, discrete movements. Nature does indeed show as a Heraclitean fire, with God as the Sun behind the sun sustaining it and lightening from it.

This places the world with great power between the Fall and the End. Hopkins does not experience a God-revealing nature as if no Fall had occurred: 'Generations', according to 'God's Grandeur' itself, 'have trod, have trod, have trod', and the world is difficult to read through being 'bleared' and 'smeared' and wearing man's 'smudge'. There is certainly a 'dearest freshness', a freshness as of the first world and maybe a newness as of the world to come, but it lives now 'deep down things'. Yet this becomes quickly a reason for hope, since, at least in the imagery of the poems, the world is closer to its end than to its beginning. The world on fire, after all, if it has a source in Heraclitus, also looks to the biblical idea of the heavens and the earth being dissolved by fire prior to their recreation. The point is almost made in Hopkins's title: 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection', and in the poem itself 'nature's bonfire' climaxes in 'the world's wildfire', and the 'I', from being mere 'matchwood', becomes, what it already is, the purest reach of carbon, of coal, 'immortal diamond'.

The end of the world can be glimpsed, seized, in the world about us, since we are already within that fire. And what of the description of morning at the end of 'God's Grandeur'?

> And though the last lights off the black West went
> Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs –
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

This is Milton's 'brooding' Dove, yet Hopkins has changed the perspective entirely. The Spirit is no longer addressed as having brooded once and for all at the beginning of Creation, but is greeted

as brooding here and now, each day. To discern the invisible in the visible is not to turn back to Eden, but to see the creation continuing despite the Fall, to see the black and then the bright, and to see the Spirit appearing at morning's dramatic and apocalyptic 'brink', an event certainly more like resurrection than just another day. (As the lines sink in, the word 'because' – the last of the tercet's careful articulations of the argument: 'And for all this.... And though. ... Because ... ' – gathers strength.)

And Hopkins's aim in writing seems to have been to relate God, the natural world, the poet, and verse (in a union far more personalised than Wordsworth's). One word to apply here would be 'mastery'. The 'Thou' who masters the speaker in the first line of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' and who thereby reveals himself in the second as God, is, in the same way, not the serene Master of the physical world but the one who continually and actively masters it. 'Fineness, proportion, of feature comes from a moulding force which succeeds in asserting itself over the resistance of cumbersome or restraining matter', Hopkins wrote in a letter to Coventry Patmore (24 September 1883), and while noting the presence of Shelley and Plato here one should also note the interplay of 'asserting' and 'resistance'. The importance of this for poetry is that, as God has to assert himself against the resistance of his world and of his poet, so Hopkins asserts himself against the cumbersome and restraining matter of his poems. Aren't the obviously Hopkinsian features of his writing even, at least in one perspective, resistances deliberately thrown in his way, not with a view to the cerebral enjoyment of difficulty overcome, in the manner of Valéry, but so that both resisting and mastering are apparent? The braiding of alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme; the flexing of stress; the wrenching and reassembling of word-order; the cram-filling, less of the line already prosodically there, as in the mastery of Pope, than of the line only brought into being by the effort; even the various kinds of compoundings, from 'heavengravel' to 'brown-as-dawning-skimmed' (from which Tomlinson and Geoffrey Hill may have taken a hint) – all these, which run the risk of self-display, it is true, and maybe without avoiding it, nevertheless make the point about the activity of will in the world. Hopkins masters words rather as God masters sins.

Another word to apply is 'stress', and here the relations are even more comprehensive. There is a stress in the usual sense of the word (often accompanied, as in the common expression, by 'strain'),

which comes directly from God to the individual. By the second stanza of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', Hopkins is already drawing attention to it by placing it last and holding it over in the syntax – 'And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress' – and also by rhyming it, with the semantic appropriateness to which the paronomasia of rhyming may always open, with 'yes' and 'confess'. A mediated stress occurs when the natural world, which is 'instressed' with the presence of God, then instresses that presence on a person. Actually, 'catching' is often the term for this, being central to the dynamics of Hopkins's world. His kingfishers 'catch' fire, and I have twice quoted him 'catching' an inscape, in the sense of grasping it with the eyes and the mind. In the first phrase of 'The Windhover': 'I caught this morning morning's minion', the catching goes further, and suggests that whatever was in the bird passed at that moment into the writer. (It is also a kind of inspiration, an event 'this morning' which has led to the poem now being written.)

The fifth and sixth stanzas of 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' bring together both meanings, and involve them with the practice of verse. The wordplay here is jubilant and very nearly stratospheric. Hopkins tells himself in the fifth stanza that although God is 'under the world's spendour and wonder', his presence has to be caught, 'His mystery must be instressed, stressed'. He stresses the need by repeating it, and refers it to a feature of his prosody. So as to declare in the next stanza that God does not confront us from the blessedness of heaven (He confronts us, according to the seventh, from the pain of the cross), he writes: 'Not out of his bliss / Springs the stress felt'. One feels the stress of Hopkins's new prosody through the juxtaposition of stresses in 'stress' and 'felt', and one gets the spring of his sprung rhythm when the word 'Springs' – an allusion at least for his own benefit – springs. (It may have been the fact that he was thinking over the details of his 'new rhythm' which led him also to include 'reeve' in stanza 12 and 'outrides' in stanza 33, terms which recall the discussion of lines *'rove over'*, and of slack syllables as 'outrides', in the 'Author's Preface'.)

As a prosodist Hopkins is concerned for the meaning of stress, and if his verse is an act of mastery it is also an attempt to capture the stressing of the world in its own stresses. He was prepared for demurs about his prosodic devices, as also presumably for the complaint that his devices of syntax too 'at times subject both the language and the reader to a strain all but disastrous'.[4] That may

well be the case, though Hopkins might have replied that the stress and strain is what he was after, as the only true way of enacting the stress that is experienced when one is instressed by the mystery of the world or encountered as a sinner by a living God. He puts so much stress on stress partly because his poetry is not meant to be a flowing consolation for the world but a version, a concentration of the world: the world exacerbated.

His interest in onomatopoeia is relevant here. One knows that he took seriously, at least on his arrival at Oxford, the notion that language, or a large area of it, originated in imitative sounds. A diary entry for 1863 runs: 'I think the onomatopoetic theory has not had a fair chance.' For it is not so much that the individual sounds in his poems, or sequences of sounds, mime their referents as that the total aural complex of a poem, along with the oral and indeed the whole-bodily movements that it asks of the reader, strive to enact its meaning. There is a 'meeting' with a sharply defined scene or event whose inscape and instress are inscaped and instressed in the poem, so that the ideal (as Donald Davie seems to have seen, though with disapproval)[5] would be the poem as a single onomatope. Hence the importance of his exclamations. His *oh's* and *ah's* are locally expressive and they have a rhythmic function, but they are also, surely, the true cry of the poem. It is not that Hopkins works up his emotions to bursting point, or not only that, but that he and his poem become things like those things in the natural world where something more inward, perhaps God, insists on appearing and 'will flame out'. It is not only that his language is wrought to a pitch, but that it too breaks open with a shout. (There is a whole world-view involved in the fact that it breaks open rather than breaking up or breaking down.) By allowing these almost unformed, almost pre-linguistic cries to emerge from under the poem, does Hopkins even make room for that language 'truer than tongue' which is acknowledged at the beginning of his first major work? The wringing of extreme articulation hints, perhaps, at the truth of inarticulacy.

His is, I suppose, a Babylonish dialect, but it also bids to be Pentecostal. There is a well known statement in a letter to Bridges, of 14 August 1879, which critics seem to abandon once Hopkins has said that the poetical language of an age 'shd. be the current language heightened'. Surprise already occurs from the notion that Hopkins could be in the line of English poets who have called poetry back to the speech and prose of their period, and we are certainly

more aware of his language as heightened than as current. The real surprise is to follow, however, and is of a different kind, for he continues: 'to any degree heightened' (to *any* degree?) 'and unlike itself'. The enemy here is obsolete language, and the poets whose practice is approved are Shakespeare as well as Milton: but 'unlike itself'? He seems to mean that, provided it remains contemporary, language in poetry may be pushed to the point where, being still itself yet now also unlike itself, it becomes both familiar and utterly unfamiliar, old and radically new; and one could argue that the language of his own poetry, as produced by the manic daring of a Hopkins, is, at its extreme edge, a language forced and remade, an English beyond English.

Tomlinson has referred, with a measure, I think, of distaste, to Hopkins's 'tormented lyricism',[6] and I agree that one should emphasise both the lyricism and the torment. Insofar as the poetry attains its abrupt, especial song, in ways unheard of and unheard before, it renews language and looks to Recreation. Each poem is a kind of small apocalypse, a dissolution by fire, a shattering of the reign of the normal for the entry of what is, in the perspective of that norm, outlandish. This is English as one can't possibly write it but as Hopkins did. Insofar as the poetry continues tormented, however, it witnesses to the Fall. Hopkins masters babble and achieves a tongue that tells, but he insists that the babble remain. That is what makes the project of his poetry so extraordinary. Rather than impose a new order on a babble which is no longer there, he enacts the conflict and projects it towards the reader. Tomlinson quotes a pointed instance:

> The frown of his face
> Before me, the hurtle of hell
> Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?
>
> ('The Wreck of the Deutschland', 3)

The stanza which this launches takes a number of hints from Psalm 139, as does the opening stanza, but the sequence, 'where, where was a, where was a place?', is Hopkins's own. One can imagine it written by the younger Eliot, but then it would have been the other way round: 'where was a place, where was a, where?' and if that sounds familiar, it is because it reminds one of line 113 of *The Waste Land*: 'What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?' Hopkins is

more not less tormented than Eliot's neurasthenic woman, yet rather than losing itself, his language gradually finds itself; it struggles in broken pieces towards a small victory, the saying of what it had to say, which it clinches with a rhyme.

* * *

Hopkins is also a poet of the body. The body is blatantly present for him, in fact, according to 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', at the onset of writing. I noted earlier the Pythian agitations with which the 'giver of breath' is described as plying his poet, and isn't the stanza of 'The Wreck' (it is true that Hopkins used it nowhere else) a kind of apparatus for breathing? Measured by their number of stresses, the lines expand and contract, becoming progressively larger against resistance (2/3 – 3 – 4 – 3 – 5 – 5 – 4 – 6), to culminate in the utterance of the last and longest. I also noted that both God and the nun 'touch' Hopkins, and in each case the bodiliness of the event is emphasised. The line, 'Over again I feel thy finger and find thee', goes beyond being 'touched' by the 'hand' of God as in the Old Testament, and beyond the usual figurative meaning of 'finger' (power), to an acute physicality aggravated by the alliterative 'feel'. Similarly, the 'heart' that is touched by the nun's telling (stanza 18) is not only, any more than in Wordsworth, a trope for the centre of the affections. Addressed as 'touched in your bower of bone', it springs Hopkins bodily into the reader's consciousness, strangely concentrated on an 'inner apartment' of his anatomy.

Hopkins also used metaphors of body when referring to his reader, and to language. There may not be much to learn, in fact, from his describing Dryden as 'the most masculine of our poets' through the stress he laid on 'the naked thew and sinew of the English language',[7] despite the celebrity of the phrase, since the metaphor is common enough. It occurs in Dryden's own preface to the *Aeneid*, where he writes of the French language that it 'is not strung with sinews like our English; it has the nimbleness of a greyhound, but not the bulk and body of a mastiff'. More suggestive are the terms of Hopkins's recommendation to the reader on how to negotiate his beats. If the beating syllable is light, he says, then the greater the number of syllables belonging to it the less is the stress to be laid on it, 'the voice passing flyingly over all the syllables of the foot'. One might fly over the word 'flyingly' were it not for the previous part of the advice where, in the case of a strong beating

syllable, the stress laid on it must be stronger the greater the number of syllables belonging to it, 'the voice treading and dwelling'.[8] For the voice to 'fly' and especially to 'tread', where expressions about the 'running on' of lines and their division into 'feet' pass back to the reader, implies that the whole body, throughout its length, is active in the mind's thoughtful scanning.

And the poetry is often about body. One thinks of 'Harry Ploughman', who almost resembles a Hopkins poem, with his 'thew' and 'sinew' and his standing 'at stress'. Or of the absence of God felt specifically in the body of the sinner, as in the sonnet, 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day', with its 'I am gall, I am heartburn' and its 'sweating selves'. Or of the attacks of God sustained on the body, as in the second stanza of 'The Wreck', where torment from the God whom Job also knew ('he runneth upon me like a giant', 16:14) is located less in an interiority of awareness than in the 'midriff'. One might think more subtly, however, of the ways in which Hopkins develops this Hebrew body-consciousness. Whether experienced in his life or imagined in his poetry, there is a physical hypersensitivity in Hopkins which can cause dismay, as when he writes in 'Spring' that a thrush 'Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring / The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing'. The accuracy of 'echoing' and 'rinse' and 'wring', along with the accurately echoing rhyme, do seem over-topped by 'lightnings', which is even, one sees, in the plural. Yet this is a small price to pay for Hopkins's ability to renew one's image of the body and of the body of the world.

For the body strains to exceed itself, while remaining body. At the end of 'Hurrahing in Harvest',

> The heart rears wings bold and bolder
> And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

It is again the heart at the centre of transformation; and a heart that both rears wings (almost conventionally: hearts do soar in poetry) while, for the sake of Christ, half hurling earth off under 'the beholder's' feet – but one reads 'his' almost as referring to the heart – suggests a whole body made single by desire, and stretching out from a passionate withinness to and beyond its extremities, towards a kind of impossible possibility. One is not surprised, in fact, that there is so much flying in Hopkins, and in 'The Windhover' the body of the speaker at one point shifts into and

then out of the body of the bird. The speaker has 'caught' the bird with the opening word, and

> in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
> High there ...

he mounts for the bird's-eye view before descending vertiginously for the human perspective in 'High there'. (The vertigo is also in the pun set going from the beginning: 'I caught this morning morning's minion, king-/dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding', where the running sound 'or' culminates in 'Falcon' only for the 'fall' to be denied. The fall does take place at the end, when 'blue-bleak embers ... Fall, gall themselves', and carries through a device presumably learnt, and mastered, from Milton.)

Here too there is a heart, and the description of it: 'My heart in hiding/Stirred for a bird!' contains before the turn a nicely mysterious phrase, which tucks away a private and inwardly human experience from the welter of physical activity. In 'Stirred' (another appeal to the usual: Hopkins, like you or me, was 'stirred' at the sight), it also merges the feelings of the heart with the heart's beating. The exciting physicality of the poem, however, is in the word 'ecstasy'. Though a term which ought to mean displacement, being beside oneself, outside of the body, it occurs like this:

> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
> In his ecstacy! then off, off forth on a swing ...

This blithe spirit *is* a bird, and its rapture fills its physique.

The physical world, being the place where God and man meet, strains at its limitations and flames with divine grandeur. And it is the bodiliness of the divine that is the most startling. Even the historical Jesus is described more physically than one might expect: the seventh stanza of 'The Wreck' refers to 'The dense and the driven Passion, and frightful sweat;/Thence the discharge of it, there its swelling to be ... What none would have known of it'. (Presumably those astonishing grim puns have been noticed, 'sweat' suggesting other disorders at the skin in 'discharge' and 'swelling'. They already have the accusing tastelessness of Geoffrey Hill's.) More pointedly, the risen Christ is physical too. In effect, the 'kingfishers' sonnet answers the question, Where is Christ to be

seen in the world now? and its reply is none of those that might have been expected from Victorian piety, or from any other.

> the just man justices;
> Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
> Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is–
> Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.

First there is what amounts to a new sense of the person, where a just man, instead of contriving justice and performing actions, 'justices' and 'acts', and where, rather than in doings separable from himself, one knows him in his 'goings'. Himself, his outerings, and the 'grace' that he 'keeps' (an expression modelled, I assume, on 'to keep faith') are all one, in a unity of being and doing realised according to a most dynamic realism. Then Christ, whose incarnation continues in a different form, 'deals' himself 'out' through such a person, and is visible even, and with some emphasis, in the bodies of his people, in 'limbs', 'eyes', and 'faces'.

The body of the world is in the same way more than a sign of the heavenly beauty. Consider again the final lines of 'God's Grandeur':

> Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs –
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

While taking over from Milton and Wordsworth the image of the Spirit as brooding dove, Hopkins alone sees the reddening sky as the breast, and the streaks of light as the wings, of the divine bird. The enthusiasm at 'ah! bright wings' is partly that of the Christian recognising the mercy of God; it is also that of the Christian see-er glimpsing somehow in the lights of morning the appearance, the appearing, of the Spirit of God. Hopkins had plenty of things to say, and they were not simple.

7

Hardy: Poetry and Death

The sequence 'Poems of 1912–13', occasioned by the death of Hardy's first wife and published in *Satires of Circumstance*, moves, it seems, without a trace of theorising, close to the centre of poetry, to its sources and its meanings. A small surprise occurs, or occurred for me, in the opening poem, with the arrival of the fourth stanza:

THE GOING

Why did you give no hint that night
That quickly after the morrow's dawn,
And calmly, as if indifferent quite,
You would close your term here, up and be gone
    Where I could not follow
    With wing of swallow
To gain one glimpse of you ever anon!

    Never to bid good-bye,
    Or lip me the softest call,
Or utter a wish for a word, while I
Saw morning harden upon the wall,
    Unmoved, unknowing
    That your great going
Had place that moment, and altered all.

Why do you make me leave the house
And think for a breath it is you I see
At the end of the alley of bending boughs
Where so often at dusk you used to be;
    Till in darkening dankness
    The yawning blankness
Of the perspective sickens me!

You were she who abode
By those red-veined rocks far West,
You were the swan-necked one who rode
Along the beetling Beeny Crest,
And, reining nigh me,
Would muse and eye me ...

The surprise is the sudden sharpness of the image, of the 'red-veined' rocks, the 'swan-necked' girl, and the gestures of the rider. It seems to surface into the poem through reaches of memory (though one doesn't know that the rocks were that colour, nor if Hardy had thought of his wife's neck as swanlike before this line) so as to create, now that she is dead, Emma and her setting. The power of the image is to some degree its puzzling suggestions, that one doesn't know quite how to understand: should one see the white, implied by the swan's neck, against the red of the rocks? Are the rocks' 'veins' to be humanised? And what of the collocation of swan and horse (and even a crest that 'beetles' ...)? Its power comes also from its particularised defining of Emma: 'You were she who ... ', 'You were the ... one who ... ', and from its addressing a woman whom we know to be not there to hear it. By the final stanza the working of the poem has produced an equally powerful and far stranger image of Hardy himself: 'I seem but a dead man held on end'.

Such abrupt images of his wife happen throughout the sequence. Here is the opening of 'After a Journey':

Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost;
Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?
Up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost,
And the unseen waters' ejaculations awe me.
Where you will next be there's no knowing,
Facing round about me everywhere,
With your nut-coloured hair,
And grey eyes, and rose-flush coming and going.

The vividness of 'With your nut-coloured hair' interrupts the visual imprecision, where the waters are even 'unseen', while its shortness interrupts the long lines, and may well be what determined the shape of the poem's stanzas. This is a one-off image, but the snap of his wife taken in the middle of 'A Dream or No':

And of how, coastward bound on a night long ago,
There lonely I found her,
The sea-birds around her,

and the foreground picture of her in 'Beeny Cliff':

O the opal and the sapphire of that wandering western sea,
And the woman riding high above with bright hair flapping free

(where she is again defined, as 'the woman'), continue to derive from an insistent myth of Emma, which rises clearly at the close of 'The Phantom Horsewoman':

Time touches her not,
But she still rides gaily
In his rapt thought
On that shagged and shaly
Atlantic spot,
And as when first eyed
Draws rein and sings to the swing of the tide.

She is the woman on horseback, and the woman associated with sea and song, an association deep in the psyche and still potent, as one knows from mermaids and sirens, from Stevens's 'The Idea of Order at Key West', or even Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.

To that extent Hardy's imagination – the essentially visual images that come, or so it seems, in the act of writing – is unexceptional, with the singularity, all the same, of Emma's being dead. For death, and Emma dead, are Hardy's muse. It is troubling to reflect how convenient that death was to the poet. It is also tempting to think that he refers to Emma as the muse of his sequence in its opening poem, when saying of her that she 'Would muse and eye me'. Her 'eyeing' him seems to corroborate the idea, yet this must indeed be a temptation, since Hardy doesn't engage in that kind of reader-conscious wit; unless the incitement to multiply meanings that comes with the inexhaustible complicity and suggestiveness of words is to be seen here as a gift, so that one might conclude that, however unlikely in Hardy's design, the wordplay is nevertheless in the poem, and may even have proceeded from a desire that Hardy wished not to acknowledge: the desire, precisely, to use his wife's death.

It is partly her voicelessness, and the world's, that leads to his speaking. The question of voice, of speech, or rather of their absence, is emphasised throughout. That same opening poem adds to the many allusions to Emma departing without a word (where the focus on her mouth in 'lip me the softest call' was the result of a revision) the regret that latterly they had ceased talking to each other. Similarly, 'A Death-Day Recalled' reverses one of the conventions of elegy, whereby the places dear to the beloved bewail his or her loss, for Hardy to accuse Emma's favourite spots of having failed to 'deplore', to 'utter' a dirge, or 'mouth a mutter', at her passing; while at the end of 'His Visitor', she acquiesces (owing to a change between the manuscript and the first edition) in rejoining 'the mute and manifold/Souls of old', in a 'roomy silence'. Against that speechlessness, he himself, of course, speaks his poems, but only, time and again, to address his wife in the full awareness that he is not being heard. The vocative is arguably the case peculiar to poetry. Rather than describing, doesn't poetry address reality? Even when employing the third person, isn't it a means by which we attempt to reach the other, rather as God in Genesis, when 'calling' or naming the world, was in fact, according to the Hebrew, calling to it? The importance of those poems written to a named recipient is surely that they bring this attempt into the light. The pain of poetry, however, is that it never quite attains the other, since the conditions in which it is written, where the world and language are in one way or another fallen, are no longer those in which God called, and in which Adam named the beasts. To adopt one of Raymond Queneau's grave paradoxes: with poetry, which in one perspective is the art of communication taken to the limit of efficacy, we can be sure of not communicating. The most blatant sign of this failure is death, and to write poems to a dead person is to clarify to the utmost our vocative need and impotence. Emma is the absent addressee of poetry; and the point is most starkly made in Hardy's case by his unbelief.

The usefulness of death is that it forces everything to an extreme, including poetry, and there is an even more extreme exploration of the failure of address here in 'The Haunter'. Emma's ghost is made to speak, in the similar knowledge that Hardy cannot hear. It is the moment in the sequence where Hardy, calling his poetry into the dark, conceives the other voice, not as responding but as itself dissipated on silence. It is truly extravagant, and nowhere more so than in the line: 'What a good haunter I am, O tell him!' Whom can

Emma possibly be addressing? – leaving aside the fact that she is not even speaking. The impossibility of communication could hardly be enacted more absolutely, or more bizarrely. As often with Hardy, he seems content that the anecdotal movement of his poem should be commonplace (isn't this a poem, after all, about the sadness of lovers no longer being able to speak to each other when one of them is dead?) while its real import, its giving words, in this case, to a voice which doesn't exist and which addresses no one, is quite far-fetched.

If Hardy speaks his poems into an emptiness he nevertheless writes them out fully, under Emma's guidance. She is the 'voiceless ghost' whom he comes to 'view' in 'After a Journey' (where it is a surprise to learn that this recuperation of sight or vision from voicelessness, which is one of the main undertakings of the sequence, was again a later addition, since the original version had Hardy coming merely to 'interview a ghost'), and he almost declares her poetic role half-way in: 'I see what you are doing: you are leading me on', for where she leads him is through the poem itself. The poem describes the scenes they once shared, and is composed progressively as he passes from one to another. 'The Voice' is quite overtly a response to Emma's call: 'Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me', and here too what seems her voice may be 'only the breeze, in its listlessness / Travelling across the wet mead to me here'. This is an image nevertheless associated with inspiration, and though the breeze is a long way from Wordsworth's, its 'travelling' to Hardy 'here' (and even the wetness of the mead?) suggest not an absence but a different kind of inspiration: a being drawn to poetry confusedly, and 'listlessly', from somewhere, that is, beyond desire, as beyond knowing, and willing. Hence the well known breaking of the stanzaic pattern in the last four lines:

> Thus I; faltering forward,
> Leaves around me falling,
> Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
> And the woman calling.

The wind sounds even more unpropitious (it is hostile throughout the sequence), while Hardy gropes his way towards 'the woman'. Yet if he has been 'faltering forward' in memory over an actual place, he has equally been doing so in the act of making his poem,

which has itself faltered forward, moreover, through its dactyls. He now steps outside ('Thus I'), to observe his poem and the 'I' who wrote it, and becomes, like Emma, a figure indissociable from a landscape. He images himself, when immersed in creativity, as undergoing a scene both poetically appropriate and highly troubled. The lines seem to emerge from way down in his experience of poetry, with their absence of finite verb and their Eliot-like present participles; the falling leaves in particular (prepared by yet another Miltonic sequence in 'fal...', 'for...', fall...' and sustained by further assonance) suggest, by their simple and traditional association, that the source of this poetry is death. And not in the abstract sense that Hardy has been led to write by thinking of his deceased wife. Isn't it death itself that he has entered: the death of the loved one, of the world, of the 'I'? And mere death, at that. Emma is not, like Beatrice, in heaven. The natural world in the sequence does not inspire him, like Wordsworth, in its life but in its dying. The death that he suffers in himself has none of that implication of resurrection in the Death which 'breathes' on Hopkins. Once again it is Hardy's unbelief that gives to his loss, and his solitude, and his experience of writing poetry in a fallen world, a moving nakedness and truth.

* * *

'The Voice', with its broken, blurted ending, which eyes the poetry from outside while prolonging and concluding it, is a genuinely modernist poem, a 'poem of 1912', and as novel in its way as 'Gerontion'. This is the place to notice another possibly avant-garde feature of the sequence: its sustained use of negatives. It is natural that it should be based on negation, since it originates in loss; but it doesn't follow that so many opening lines should state negatively, including that of the first poem, which launches the whole series under the sign of something not happening ('Why did you give no hint that night... ?'), nor that 'Your Last Drive', which is the second poem, should withdraw into a kind of recession of negativity. It laments the fact that, on her last drive, Emma did not realise that a spot she passed was soon to be her grave, and that Hardy did not see that her face was soon to be the face of the dead. Only in the third stanza does he write: 'I drove not with you', which comes as a surprise, and continues: '... Yet had I sat / At your side that eve I should not have seen...'; in other words, I wasn't there and if I had been I shouldn't have noticed. It is a minor point; yet the negatives

throughout the sequence reinforce the unreality of the world that Hardy is entering here, and to which I shall return.

The wind and leaves of 'The Voice' have traditional meanings, like the 'fire' of life and the 'cold wind' of death in the final poem 'Where the Picnic Was', but in general Hardy allows images to arrive without interrogating them, with a kind of 'negative capability'. So their power also lies on occasion in the fact that the reader cannot quite grasp why they are so powerful. When Emma's ghost speaks, in 'His Visitor', of preparing to travel to where they lived together for over twenty years: 'I shall go in the gray, at the passing of the mail-train', it is true that the knowledge that they could hear the mail-train from their house and that Hardy himself is remembering such moments adds to the poignancy of the line (one has to say this in the teeth of more sophisticated views about extraneous information), but its effect comes from elsewhere, perhaps from the apparent irrelevance of the image, or from the idea of passing. Similarly with the images of violence. One can read the violence of the elements as a transmutation of Hardy's own mental harshness towards Emma, as a means, in the act of poetry, of purging and exculpating himself, now that he has laid her in 'a noiseless nest' that 'No sea beats near' ('I Found Her Out There'). One can then point to his describing savagery by a combination of hyperbole and a kind of virtual litotes, so as to exacerbate it, in 'Rain on a Grave', where clouds that 'spout' waters 'ruthlessly' encounter, in the lines

> Her who but lately
> Had shivered with pain
> As at touch of dishonour
> If there had lit on her
> So coldly, so straightly
> Such arrows of rain,

a remotely mental notion in 'dishonour' and a past subjunctive in 'Had shivered'; and where, in a singular phrase, drops of rain 'chanced' to 'pelt' her. Yet this pushing beyond the facts (a tress of Emma's hair, tugged by the wind in 'I Found Her Out There', flaps her cheek 'like a flail') conveys more than analysis can grasp. In that same poem he remembers Emma on the Cornish coast looking at Tintagel,

> While the dipping blaze
> Dyed her face fire-red.

The description is up to a point factual, and the result of observation, yet it seems nevertheless to loom from below the poem, so sudden and inappropriate is the stress on the sun as a 'blaze' and on the redness of her face as that of a 'fire', even without the hint of the sun 'dipping' explosively into the sea, or the complicity of 'Dyed' with 'died'.

The many images of Emma as a child likewise reach beyond themselves. One might place them beside these lines from 'The Voice':

> Let me view you, then,
> Standing as when I drew near to the town
> Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
> Even to the original air-blue gown!

It is interesting to a writer that, yet again, this particular gown didn't come in the composing of the poem but in its preparing for the first edition. Hardy may have found it when simply looking for a more telling description than his first attempt: 'Even to the original hat and gown!', but what came, as if prompted by the word 'original', and as if it had been waiting from the beginning, was the suggestion that the gown not only had the colour of air but *was* a kind of air ('air-blue' being far more airy than the more expected 'sky-blue'), and even that the 'origin' which he glimpses goes beyond the gown that Emma was wearing to an origin of pure air, before the complications of their marriage. Eden also comes to mind. One might also view her recovery of childhood through this passage from 'Rain on a Grave':

> Would that I lay there
> And she were housed here:
> Or better, together
> Were folded away there
> Exposed to one weather
> We both ...

The conventional thought of the two opening lines (but a conventional poet could not have written 'housed') is followed by another conventional thought, which the phrase, 'Exposed to one weather', completely transforms. The 'both' become 'one', and though 'folded away' they are still 'Exposed', and what unites them is

weather. 'Weather' is one of the great English words, a Germanic gift. The wish is not that they should experience nature, or the elements, or climate; and in this realism of days and nights, and of the events of rain, sun, wind, mist, as they impinge on the senses and beyond, in a shared, dead-yet-alive, passivity, one intuits something like Hardy's version of paradise.

For the world as it is, for Hardy, is alive yet dead. There is another surprising image in 'His Visitor': 'I discern the dim faces of the sleep-wrapt servants'. The thought that the faces are dim from being observed through windows, from the outside, doesn't remove the mystery of a dimness associated, moreover, with a neighbouring idea in 'sleep-wrapt'. The poetry as a whole discerns a world dim and wrapt in a kind of sleep, and is addressed, after all, to a ghost. Nor are sleep and death a theme and a perspective simply because Hardy is writing about his departed wife. Not only are ghosts 'frequent denizens of Hardy's poems';[1] he is himself a ghost. In *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* occurs this extraordinary passage:

> For my part, if there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh; by which I mean putting on the manners of ghosts, wandering in their haunts, and taking their views of surrounding things. To think of life as passing away is a sadness; to think of it as past is at least tolerable. Hence even when I enter into a room to pay a simple morning call I have unconsciously the habit of regarding the scene as if I were a spectre not solid enough to influence my environment, only fit to behold and say, as another spectre said: 'Peace be unto you'.[2]

However one may view this as a response to the human condition (it is the response, I should say, of an Adam who does realise that he has eaten death but who abandons the search for new life), it has Hardy's usual boldness, and a decided intellectual distinction in the transformation of the commonplace about 'life passing' into the uncommon notion of 'life past', and in the gathering in of the risen Christ, and his somewhat different conviction, as a fellow spectre.

So the poetry, while it leads into Emma's ghost world, also intimates that this world is already ghostly. In 'Beeny Cliff' Hardy remembers his being on the headland with 'the woman', and the gulls crying below, but what he actually writes is, 'The pale mews

plained below us'. 'Pale' rather than 'white', a slight touch, but then Hardy is extremely subtle, suggests the near-unreality, almost the ghostliness, of the birds. (I don't want to over-stress the importance of Hardy's revisions, since he found most of the decisive images of the sequence in his first writing; this is nevertheless another which only came with a rewriting, albeit an early one – 'pale mews' in the first edition replaced, on the manuscript, 'puffins' written over 'white mews' – through his ability, it seems, to experience his poems over again, and to delve anew into their sources.) By playing a variation on his opening line, which I quoted earlier: 'O the opal and the sapphire of that wandering western sea', in the final stanza: 'What if still in chasmal beauty looms that wild weird western shore', he penetrates even further, amid all those Victorian effects, into the 'weirdness' of the real, and hints at the 'shore' of death, where the blaze of the sun dips with the rest of life. The whole sequence travels towards that shore, in a movement whose significance is not exhausted by the biographical fact that Hardy returned there after losing his wife. To enter that region, as in the two concluding poems, is to find people dead. The sea there is a place beyond articulate speech, whose engulfing waves, 'engrossed in saying their ceaseless babbling say', are the final threat to the words of poetry. And by calling the weird sea a 'nether sky', Hardy effectively, as in describing Christ as a ghost, removes heaven.

The suggestions of the shore culminate in a description of Emma, in 'The Phantom Horsewoman':

> Yea, far from that shore
> Does he carry this vision of heretofore:
>
> IV
>
> A ghost-girl-rider.

This is the only such enjambment from one stanza to the next in the sequence, and it is reinforced by the intervention of the new stanza's number. The result is to isolate the phrase, and draw attention to its being composed of three nouns hyphenated, as if Hardy were making the closest collocation of 'ghost' and 'girl' and 'rider' that the language allows. Considering Emma as a ghost even in life, he sees, in this 'vision', an association of the woman with

both horse and sea in a phantom world. In the final line he will add her ghostly singing. It is as if his loss has enabled him to press the ancient images of sexuality and death to their limit.

The world turns towards, and is seen as already turning into, the 'farther shore'. Its ghostliness is most powerful when the reality of the real also insists. 'After a Journey' similarly presents the places that Emma knew when alive as her 'haunts' and as where he and she 'haunted ... together', so that their being 'dead scenes' only derives in part from the fact that she is now a ghost; but it also contains the sharpness of 'With your nut-coloured hair', and especially, detaching itself likewise from the surrounding lines, yet another notation of birds:

> ... And not the thin ghost that I now frailly follow!
>
> Ignorant of what there is flitting here to see,
> The waked birds preen ...

I suppose because Hardy conceals such things, and also because so many readers have persuaded themselves into thinking him awkward, one easily passes over the wide-awake consonants and monosyllables of 'The waked birds preen', and the contrast of that daytime alertness with the poem's principal mood of frailly following a thin ghost. In a way the sudden, clear images enhance the dim, deathlike atmosphere. They also have another origin, however. At the first reference to a dream world, in 'The Haunter':

> Yes, I companion him to places
> Only dreamers know,
> Where the shy hares print long paces ...

the image of the hares is itself dreamlike, but if one values it one does so, I presume, for its accuracy. In the original version, where the hares 'show their faces', it was actually more in keeping with dream, whereas in the revision the hares are both more mysterious and fugitive and more closely observed. Much of Hardy's poetry is devoted to what one might call the piety of noticing. (This would seem, indeed, to be the devotion peculiar to English poetry.) One thinks, outside the sequence, of 'Afterwards', probably his most famous poem, which contains such passages as:

If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid's soundless blink,
The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to alight
Upon the wind-warped upland thorn

(how accurate that 'Upon' is), or:

If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm,
When the hedgehog travels furtively over the lawn ... ;

and it is, of course, a poem actually about Hardy as a man who notices. But it also brings to a head the contradiction between his regard for the life around him and his seeing himself as a ghost, since all of these, in their way, religious observings of the real are considered quite overtly in the perspective of his being dead.

The to-and-fro between a ghost world and such careful looking is even vertiginous in 'A Dream or No'. The poem asks, with a kind of controlled and crescending hysteria which can remind one now of later things in Yeats, whether Emma was really associated with the places where Hardy knew her, whether she truly existed, and whether the places themselves exist. By supposing that he might have been 'charmed' into these commonsense beliefs by some 'strange necromancy', he lets in the contrary idea, that communication with death has questioned the possibility of anything being ultimately real. Yet this is the poem with the image of Emma surrounded by sea-birds. In the ending:

Does there even a place like Saint-Juliot exist?
Or a Vallency valley
With stream and leafed alley,
Or Beeny, or Bos with its flounce flinging mist?

a final, distinct glimpse of the world, albeit of mist, stands fragile against the persistence of those unanswered questions. The poem is a quite anguished version of the apparently calm ghost passage in the *Life*, and Hardy's dating it at the bottom, '1913' on the manuscript and then 'February 1913' for the first edition, seems a way of reassuring himself that the world is truly there.

There is, naturally, no resurrection in this world that Hardy haunts while observing it closely, and there is no recreation of the world in his poetry – or no attempt at recreation. This doesn't necessarily follow, since the most secular poet can see poetry itself

as a reworking of the world. Hardy's morality is to notice, and to record impressions (the 'mission' of poetry according to the *Life*, page 408); and his interest in attending to the facts of a world and his responses to them leads even to an unwillingness to promote the poem as an artwork. Isn't this at least one way of understanding aspects of his writing that continue to perplex? His irregularity, for example. It is true that in the *Life* he presents his avoidance of a too regular beat, and his imitation of spontaneity in the details of Gothic architecture with a view to producing the unforeseen in his metres and stanzas, as a 'cunning irregularity' and as resulting from a love of 'the art of concealing art' (page 323). At the same time, that apparent casualness avoids the impression of prosodic and verbal power; one is drawn to an inward art rather than to an outward artistic perfection. His frequent working by stress rather than by syllable, his mingling of anapaests, dactyls and iambs, gives to the line an uneffortful feel; while his complex metres, and the unprecedented changes of stanza through more than nine hundred poems, rather than highlighting form as one might have expected, actually serve to divert attention away from the form, and to make it appear a private and rather eccentric concern of the poet. His prosody is as masterly, in its quite different way, as that of Hopkins, and a poet can learn a great deal from it. Yet, in contrast to Hopkins, there is no *offer* of complexity and mastery. He is in many ways Hopkins's opposite, and whereas Hopkins aims for a maximum of artistry, Hardy, I suppose, aims for a maximum of articulacy.

He is exemplary in his concern to see the world rather than transcend it, and to open his poems towards the world rather than transfigure the world in his poems. A poet of a different ambition needs, it seems to me, to come to terms with the lessons he implies. Yet it is a ghost world that he sees, and also a world that is terribly fallen. This is most remarkably the case in another poem outside the sequence, 'Nature's Questioning', which begins:

> When I look forth at dawning, pool,
> Field, flock, and lonely tree,
> All seem to gaze at me
> Like chastened children sitting silent in a school.

To see nature as hurt, accusing, and looking back at one, is a genuine vision, a gift to the imagination. It is not impossible that Hardy was thinking of Adam as the inadequate 'master' of the

second stanza whose teaching has dulled the faces of those aspects of nature and destroyed their 'early zest'; and certainly St Paul's sense of a creation subjected to 'vanity' and 'corruption' comes to mind when they wonder why ever they find themselves here, and surmise:

> Or are we live remains
> Of Godhead dying downwards, brain and eye now gone?

I know of no more powerful enactment, in fact (one needs to read the whole poem), of that passage in the letter to the Romans. For someone who has accepted the Pauline teaching, even the thought that the world may have been made by some 'Vast Imbecility' and then abandoned can convince, as against Housman's 'brute and blackguard' (in poem IX of *Last Poems*), not because it is less blasphemous but because, in Hardy's perspective, where the world is seen only as fallen, it is true.

The centre of that fallen, ghost world is, of course, Emma. In a poetry where love, death, memory and desire merge, to deliver vivid, phantasmal images, everything radiates from the image of a dead woman. She can no longer be reached in life, and in a way she cannot be reached in poetry either. In addressing her absence in 'Your Last Drive', Hardy almost says as much: the final line, 'You are past love, praise, indifference, blame', at least places her beyond rhetoric, and its two complementary ends of praising and blaming. In herself she is out of range of his words, and only appears in his poem as, precisely, an image. Which is why the 'Poems of 1912–13' exist at a certain depth within poetry, if it is true that poetry, rather than recording a world, is an activity continually endeavouring, and continually failing, to meet with a world. Emma, in whom are concentrated Hardy's yearning and the very landscapes of reality, is an absence which draws everything into itself. Isn't this the meaning, indeed, of elegy? It is the kind of poem where our need of the world and the frustration of that need, and the troubled relation of words and things, are taken to the highest degree of intensity and clarity; where the world as focussed in a loved person is sought, and lost, and also reappears as an image, as 'Lycidas', or 'Adonais'. However crudely Poe may have stated it, the death of a beautiful woman, or of a beautiful man, *is* the central theme of poetry; and Emma, as the absent sign who is not even named in the sequence (she is 'Dear ghost'), offers a peculiarly lucid and sad insight into what poetry does and why it exists.

8

Marianne Moore: 'Transcendence, Conditional'

The first line-and-a-bit in Marianne Moore's *Complete Poems*:

> Dürer would have seen a reason for living
> in a town like this,

contains two unobtrusive, though vertiginous, double meanings. That Dürer should find a reason for living in a town like this while at the same time finding, in a town like this, a reason for living, uncovers in a single phrase the urgent within the relaxed, the momentous within the everyday. That he should 'see' the reason, travels from sight to insight – it is relevant that Dürer was a painter – from literal seeing to figurative.

The device continues through 'The Steeple-Jack'. The next words, 'with eight stranded whales / to look at', move even more coolly between looking at whales and contemplating huge helplessness and mortality, while later passages allude to different kinds of seeing and reinforce them paronomastically with 'sea' or 'seem'. The opening of 'The Jerboa', within a hostile view of Roman and Egyptian culture, slips from a bronze cone that 'looks like a work of art made to give / to a Pompey' to lords who 'looked on as theirs, / impalas and onigers'. Even her first book-title, *Observations*, joined visual and intellectual observing; and one realises that perceiving with the mind, rather than being merely metaphorical (I may 'see what you mean' with my eyes closed) derives here from actual perception, and that a close relation of seeing to 'seeing' is being attempted.

A great deal of Marianne Moore's poetry is clearly concerned with the question, What can you see when you look? and it is a question for which she is not alone in desiring an answer. This is a basic issue

in a period for which the largely Christian certitude of transcendence continues to become gradually more clouded. Strangely, what one is most aware of in her poems is the literally visible, which the descriptions of animals in particular deliberately and copiously promote. Surfaces do not give way to depth; appearances are not erased by hidden reality. Her poems seethe with ornament, yet the ornament is not there to ornament something: it is the something. Along with the eagerness to see, moreover, goes a care for the otherness of what she observes, a care that has been important for later poets and that has appealed to writers on her work. Denis Donoghue refers to her 'generous perception':[1] she teaches one that there can be a generosity in perception as in human relations, that we can be generous of observation as of time. (Not, alas, that persistence and closeness in looking guarantee purity of motive.) The generosity even redeems aggression. In that first part of 'The Jerboa' there is 'Too Much', a decadent plethora, an excess of exquisiteness. Yet as object after object is handled by the eye:

> round bone boxes – the pivoting
> lid incised with a duck-wing
>
> or reverted duck –
> head;

or:

> Princes
> clad in queens' dresses,
> calla or petunia
> white, that trembled at the edge, and queens in a
> king's underskirt of fine-twilled thread like silk-
> worm gut,

scorn turns to delight, and a rhetoric of blame is transfigured into a rhetoric of praise.

Seeing opens to 'seeing', perceiving an objective world to 'perceiving' that is has a life of its own. And this 'ethical extension of fact', as Charles Tomlinson calls it, is wide and various, as 'the presence becomes a moral presence, or one that begets nuances of thought where a moral atmosphere asks for definition'.[2] Another way that surfaces speak is conveyed, again in 'The Steeple-Jack', not in a double but in a startling triple-take: 'it is a privilege to see

so/much confusion', where three, or maybe four, layered meanings progressively lengthen the phrase. One of the senses of 'confusion' here seems to be Latin, a mingling together, as objects clearly themselves are also related to others. The sea's purple is that of a peacock's neck. Boats advance as if in a groove. A summer-house is sugar-bowl shaped. Stars in the sky answer to a star on a steeple, at the point where it is a privilege to see so: the distinctness of the stars prevents them from merely merging, and the 'confusion' hinted at here is the major one, between heaven and earth. Varieties of simile link the world in Romantic analogies – she compares exuberantly, as Randall Jarrell says, 'everything to everything else'[3] – but in the manner of Marianne Moore. For there is a certain oddness in the connections she hits on. The flower salpiglossis, for example, described without ado as having 'spots and stripes', turns up later in a diffident little newt lingered over with a kind of luxury of precision – it has 'white pin-dots on black horizontal spaced-/out bands' – whose colours, drained of detail, recur on a sign in plain 'black and white'. The diversity of things related is even accented by a nice yet bizarre insistence on numbers: eight whales, a twenty-five-pound lobster, four fluted columns, and so on.

Her poems also 'see', however, more mysteriously; presence becomes religious presence. The intervention of another painter in the book's second poem, 'The Hero', defines vision in a quietly euphoric metaphor, of an El Greco 'brimming with inner light'. Surfaces are depth, not because, as in later writers, there is no depth but because depth, well seen, rises to fill the surface; depth appears. All her animal poems, it seems, are sounded by 'O to Be a Dragon':

> If I, like Solomon, ...
> could have my wish –
>
> my wish ... O to be a dragon,
> a symbol of the power of Heaven – of silkworm
> size or immense; at times invisible.
> Felicitous phenomenon!

The dragon is legendary but there could be no better word than 'phenomenon' to describe it, since it combines what is prodigious with what is perceived. (The silkworm suggests a delicacy of perceiving, as do the products of its own and our spinning.) Even

more than the jelly-fish of a few pages later, a more material instance of something both 'visible' and 'invisible', the dragon, symbol of the small or immense, visible or invisible, power of Heaven, quivers with intimation. It is implied that all her lizards have this quality, and one notes that, as well as salamanders 'on fire' yet 'unconsumed' ('Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns'), and basilisks 'whose look will kill' ('The Plumet Basilisk'), an ordinary chameleon gets his food by 'snap(ping) the spectrum up' ('To a Chameleon'). Concerned for wood-weasels and arctic oxes, she nevertheless writes often of real creatures played-through by the fabulous.

If certain animals can be seen as phenomena, a number of moments in her poetry see humans as similarly intensified. Take the middle stanza of 'What Are Years?':

> He
> sees deep and is glad, who
> accedes to mortality
> and in his imprisonment rises
> upon himself as
> the sea in a chasm, struggling to be
> free and unable to be,
> in its surrendering
> finds its continuing.

The poem's theme of a captivity that is freedom looks traditional enough. Doesn't its power, however, lie in what the comparison that it makes only hints at: the vastness of the sea beyond the chasm, of the person beyond the prison? Acceding to mortality secures, in Marianne Moore's world, a quite incommensurate enlargement of life, an 'eternity' – the final word – at once unattainable and already won. The depth is also accompanied by a rising movement, the centre of the poem's contradictory structure, that recalls a moment of calm in 'Marriage':

> the heart rising
> in its estate of peace
> as a boat rises
> with the rising of the water.

The comparison, whose source is given as Richard Baxter's *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, buoyantly locates the agency this time as other, and under, and all around.

And what, in 'The Hero', of the decorous frock-coated Negro doing service at Mount Vernon, who tells a sightseer where Washington and his lady are buried, and is said to be 'standing like the shadow / of the willow'? It is a truly strange simile, and while strange similes are easy, truly strange ones are rare, the doors to understanding. The Negro has a 'sense of human dignity' and 'reverence for mystery'; neither seeing the hobo nor being out 'seeing a sight' – Washington's very tomb – but seeing (or being) 'the rock/crystal thing to see', what he 'sees' is mortality, a mystery more than human, as guardian of the grave. He is like the further willow withdrawn from appearance; the real willow on the grass but not of it, obscure yet revealed by the sun; the shadow that absorbs all of the willow, and all colour, into an adumbration, a dark, of possibility .... Like other trees, firs, in 'An Octopus', 'each like the shadow of the one beside it' (a line come upon in the seventh section of Ruskin's *Frondes Agrestes*), the Negro seems to stand beside himself, in a mysterious relation, larger than life.

It is here that reference is made to an El Greco brimming with light. Shadow and inner light are clearly not considered incompatible as images of seeing deep. Her poetry, like Eliot's, goes by both the opposing ways, noting 'how by darkness a star is perfected' ('By Disposition of Angels'), and in its few explorations of darkness being more suggestive than in its exploring of light. The end of 'Then the Ermine', a poem most of which baffles me, indicates a 'Foiled explosiveness' that has a 'power of implosion', and is another 'perfecter' and also a 'concealer'. It then gathers those abstractions across the mysterious threshold of yet another 'like', into 'violets by Dürer' (flowers that, instead of dazzling, implode, perfect, conceal), and concludes, after a long semi-colon, with the words 'even darker'.

There is some, biblical, theorising of the relation between the visible and the invisible. 'Blessed Is the Man', says the poem of that title, 'whose faith is different / from possessiveness – of a kind not framed by "things which do appear"'. Actually, it is a matter of some delicacy with Marianne Moore to know how much to attend to the context of any of her quotations; the quote in this case may exhaust its function by defining, as faith in what does not appear, a faith in various virtues, including courage. Her note does direct one, however, to Hebrews 11:3, which, as well as also providing the word 'framed', is concerned, like her poetry, with seeing: 'Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of

God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear'. In her poems too, objects are sometimes seen on the near edge of an unseen hinterland. Well-known lines from 'He "Digesteth Harde Yron"':

> The power of the visible
> is the invisible

may also have a scriptural basis, in Romans 1:20: 'For the invisible things of (God) from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead'. One notes, in this other fundamental text about the seen and the unseen, that the word 'power' would also have been lifted, to describe what the visible derives from the invisible; and one remembers that the dragon will be the symbol of the power specifically of heaven. The move in her poetry from seeing to 'seeing' may well relate to the fact that, according to St Paul, invisible things (*aórhata*) are visible to the mind (*kathorhātai*).

The theorising, nevertheless, is minimal; the indication is assumed to be enough. Whereas the charged moments in Eliot ('The moment in the arbour where the rain beat', etc.) are placed in a continuity of Christian speculation, in Marianne Moore they occur and are left, they are illumined by 'piercing glances' ('When I Buy Pictures') but not insisted on, and their imagery is not usually religious. She celebrates the variegations of the visible (God's world), that one is not ambitious to own, and the power and mystery of the invisible (God's world), with little show of having a design on us.

* * *

One also learns that to 'perceive' is to disturb. In registering visibilities so as to surprise invisibilities, her poetry operates a change on the world: it enacts a process of seeing, 'seeing', and modifying. 'Dürer' is the first word to be met in her poetry, and a major change is in terms of visual art. I am not thinking of her poems about artefacts, though there are many of these, and, although her ways of making poems have been interestingly compared with the ways of painters, especially Dürer, El Greco, the Cubists and the Chinese, it is not the relation of her poetry to painting that concerns me: rather, the relation, in her poetry, of the world to painting. The

earliest figures in the *Complete Poems* alert one to this relation, when water in 'The Steeple-Jack' is 'etched / with waves as formal as the scales / on a fish'. The simile works inwardly within the world, fish being in the water, while 'etched and 'formal' reach across for another, pictorial mode by which the world may be perceived. In fact it is usually the simile that draws-in art: in the third stanza the colour-changes of the sea are compared ('as') to colour-changes in Dürer, and the poetry as a whole includes, among other instances, a lizard with tail-bands painted 'As by a Chinese brush' ('The Plumet Basilisk'), chiton-folds of a nautilis 'like the lines in the mane of / a Parthenon horse' ('The Paper Nautilus'), and a conifer contrived 'in imitation of the glyptic work of jade and hard-stone cutters' ('The Monkey Puzzle'); along with a jerboa whose leaps are 'like the uneven notes / of the Bedouin flute', and a mountain damned by the public 'like Henry James' ('An Octopus').

That the simile should largely preside over this change means that the scene is not interfered with, displaced, by art. There is, decidedly, delight in imaginative possibility beyond what is warranted by fact: commenting in a letter to Ezra Pound, of 9 January 1919,[4] on a passage in 'Old Tiger' about a leopard 'spotted / underneath and on its toes', she acknowledges that leopards are not spotted underneath but adds, 'in old illuminations they are', and then, with gusto, 'and I like the idea that they are'. Yet she usually implies the artistic virtuality within the object to be itself a fact: looked at in this way, the folds *are* like a sculpted mane. When the frigate pelican is said, in the poem of that title, to realise 'Rasselas's friend's project' of wings uniting levity with strength, life is imitating art in the sense that it can genuinely be seen in its terms: the world of the imagination, however remote (that double genitive), closes with the world we call real. The scene, the creature, the object, is accomplished in being perceived as art, in convincing the mind's eye, the eye of possibility, of the artistry of the actual.

The process of change, and its theory, are clearest in terms of colour. 'In the Days of Prismatic Color' looks back to a time 'when Adam / was alone' and colour was 'fine' (and so, etymologically, finished and bounded) with 'originality' (that is, with origin), not, as in art, refined and original; and when obliqueness, which may now suggest deviation and obliquity, was simply a variation of the perpendicular, 'plain to see'. Regretting that 'it is no / longer that', the poem alludes to a kind of fall of colour – a fall from Eden being a recurring assumption in her writing – which is also a fall of the

observable world, into complexity and indirection. Yet what is most evident about her own colours is that they are extremely choice: 'the crimson, the copper, and the Chinese vermilion of the poincianas', 'fifty shades of mauve and amethyst' ('People's Surroundings'), 'ivory white, snow white, / oyster white and six others' ('Marriage'). If there is again a suggestion of 'too much' – an ordinary steeple-jack takes over as painter from Dürer at the other end of his poem to gild the star with a primary colour, and of Wallace Stevens's exultant grasp of spectacle with its similarly opulent colours she has commented in *Predilections* (page 34) that it 'might be alarming were it not for its persistent foil of dissatisfaction' – her poetry moves nevertheless to reverse the lapse of colour, to draw felicity from the fall; to be, for a perceived world that is flawed, a way of seeing newly.

It is true that, time and again, her poems derive not from life but from art, not, for example, from animals but from pictures of animals. Many of her lines were also taken from other writers. One might conclude that the immediate reference in her poems is to art-works and writings; that life is removed behind its representations, as, in the six separate quotations that constitute the end of 'Novices', the sea as analogue of the Hebrew language is withdrawn behind phrases about the sea. Maybe her (American) poetry is a very superior form of tourism, which consists of staying at home, or a glossy catalogue of rather expensive items and, in some cases, sayings. And it is pleasing to think that her *Complete Poems* has preserved some quite select pieces from, among others, *The Illustrated London News*. Or is this her deliberate and provocative way of achieving what Stevens calls 'fiction'? For Stevens it is only through our fictions, and ultimately through a 'supreme', that is, a loftiest and a final, fiction, that we grasp the real, though he doesn't himself reach out through the fictions of others. Marianne Moore, while giving a closer account than Stevens of a perceivable world, insists even more than he on the fictionality of that account, by overtly mingling the world with representations of it.

Her perspective was unemphatically Christian, Stevens's was explicitly not; and one sees the need to think further with her about representation, though I am not sure that she would wish to follow me here. If one accepts the premise of a fallen world, subjected, in St Paul's words, to 'corruption' and 'vanity', isn't meaning, or the deepest meaning, fictive in any case? No longer unproblematically present in the observed and to the observer, meaning is an absence

which has to be laboured for. When it is achieved, when the object forms into a legibility, meaning comes as a kind of aesthetic consonance: it is *there*, or seems to be, but it has an air of literature (or painting, or music). In attaining meaning, moreover, the real changes; meaning is the possibility of the real, for good or evil. For the discovery, or imposition, of meaning in a fallen world is related to the deepest change of that world, to its recreation. And since art is arguably a metaphor that we have been given of that recreation, to 'see', to perceive meaning, is to enter a fiction as of the world remade. Of course, there is all the difference in the world, and beyond, between seeing the real world in its meaning and projecting a fantasy, a delusion, a wilful dreamscape. The problem is to know the difference, in a fallen world; so she says of her Negro, about to be associated with an El Greco painting, that he speaks to the hobo 'as if in a play', and of her steeple-jack, that 'he might be part of a novel'. They and the world of which they are a focus achieve something like the status of an art-work; but they are presented in this way only within the hypothesis of an 'as if', or within a speculation about what might be, which is qualified by an immediate 'but', by a look at the everyday, and by a sign with an everyday message:

> but on the sidewalk a
> sign says C. J. Poole, Steeple-Jack.

Even to talk of the real and of the fictive, as if the distinction were perspicuous, is in effect to ignore the Fall. And if acts of seeing involve representations – 'Things seen', writes Stevens in *Opus Posthumous* (page 162), 'are things as seen' – so do all phrasings and especially all poems: things said are things as said. So the second change that she works on the world is a change into writing. The change is quite conscious, and her poetry, it seems, both celebrates and mocks it. Within a dense context in 'The Pangolin', she describes man as 'writing-/master to this world'. The poem has stated (her poems state often and without embarrassment) that 'To explain grace requires/a curious hand', a high-pitched idea, where 'curious' refers to a quality that she associates in her essay 'Idiosyncrasy and Technique' (*A Marianne Moore Reader*) with a sense of significance, itself an attribute of genius, and probably benefits from its etymological and archaic meanings to include 'careful' and 'skilled'. The hand, which as the latter passage

suggests is at least in part one's writing hand, is also related to the pangolin's hands and so connects our writing with our animality. The opposing strains: a concern with grace and the reduction of writing to a refinement of animal skill, continue when the writing-master 'griffons a dark/"Like does not like like that is obnoxious"'. The 'darkness' of what is written is partly heroic, as is the fabulous suggestion of 'griffons'; 'griffons' is also mock-heroic. A verb which she seems to have invented, it reinforces the animal association through the dog and the griffon-vulture, and, since it derives from the French *griffonner*, it specifically demotes our writing hand to a 'claw' or *griffe* and our writing to 'scrawling'. The very phrase about the writing-master, while indicating mastery, only allows us the role of pedagogue: we don't master the world by writing, or even write the world, we merely teach it to write, and subservience is suggested in the preposition 'to' rather than 'of the world'.

Reality changes as Marianne Moore instructs it in writing itself out. I don't wish to exaggerate the burlesque, since the effect is often quite other, as in this line from 'Novices': 'the lucid movements of the royal yacht upon the learned scenery of Egypt'. The movements, the royal yacht and the scenery occur in a physical world, though 'scenery', reinforced by that carefully selected 'upon', is also partly mental, the mind's almost-artistic mode of picturing a natural place; while 'lucid' and 'learned' move stages further into the mental, and so suspend that perceived world recreatively between matter and consciousness, between the lucidity of light and the lucidity of the mind. Yet La Fontaine practised a writing not so different from this within a context evidently mock-heroic, and it is the burlesque aspect of Marianne Moore's writing that needs stressing.

Take, for instance, her over-writing. When Yvor Winters thought he had found among her weaknesses 'a tendency to a rhetoric more complex than her matter',[5] he made, surely, an enlightening mistake. The attitude that gives rise to such a comment, so often abstersive and by no means in itself mistaken, cannot deal with a use of language that delights in going too far, that phrases and rephrases the world to the point where the matter *is* in part the rhetoric. Here is a swan under the willows in Oxford, in 'Critics and Connoisseurs':

> Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were
> ingredients in its

disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was
not proof against its
proclivity to more fully appraise such bits
of food as the stream

bore counter to it.

The excess here, the wit, is in that inexhaustible investing of the bird-brain of the swan with cultivated, polysyllabic abstractions. La Fontaine again comes to mind, whom we found, in a cool parenthesis in 'The Sun and the Frogs', challenging his readers to appreciate his prolixity:

Les reines des étangs, grenouilles veux-je dire
(Car que coûte-t-il d'appeler
Les choses par noms honorables?)

Marianne Moore's own translation, in *The Fables of La Fontaine*, is:

These frogs or queens of the swamp, to speak with care
(For what does it cost to use, when all is said,
A name that is honorable?)

Or take what one might loosely call zeugma. It may be that the odd collocations in her poetry, to which I referred when discussing her seeing of analogies, relate to the disorganisation and rearrangement of the visual in Cubist painting; yet they are decidedly burlesque. In 'The Hero' one comes with neither warning nor emphasis upon 'the semi-precious cat's eyes of the owl', while birds in 'A Grave' contrive to 'swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls'. In 'The Steeple-Jack', seagulls fly 'One by one in two's and three's', which is perfectly feasible but seems wrong, and the volatiles do appear to favour the sequence one, two, three; the 'fife-and-drum' of a storm is recalled snappily in the next stanza by a 'trumpet-vine', which is itself recalled in the salpiglossis, whose etymological meaning, should one care to check, is 'trumpet-tongue'; and a spider-wort turns up again when the jack lets down a rope 'as a spider spins a thread'. The claw-hand of Jacob links with the 'Chippendale / claw' of the jerboa. It is a singular way of yoking elements of the world one to another almost willy-nilly in the new space of one's poem (only Raymond

Queneau, that I can think of, works in a comparable manner), a gravity delivered in quirks.

Similarly with her lists. Again in 'The Steeple-Jack', as soon as she has announced that in a town like this 'you have / the tropics at first hand', there cascades an apparently interminable catalogue of plants, which manages surreptitiously to include any number of other objects: 'moon-vines', 'flags', 'ragged sailors' ..., and in particular an inventory of creatures: 'fox-glove', 'giant snap-dragon', 'toad-plant', 'tigers', etc. One is again reminded of Queneau. There is also the neat bathos at the new line, after such a jostling forward of different flowers, in:

> petunias, ferns; pink lilies, blue
> ones ...

And when the list seems to be complete it starts up again:

> The climate
>
> is not right for the banyan, frangipani, or
> jack-fruit trees;

as if the writer were determined, having told us all that is there, to inform us of quite a few things that are not. (It was apparently Charles Tomlinson who persuaded her to reinstate the flower passage after its exclusion from the 1951 *Collected Poems*; I can't share his regret, however, that the more direct 'There are no banyans' has been replaced by the present transition,[6] where the suggestion of a new departure: 'The climate ... ', the expectant blank, and then the arrival of another list to be embarked on – a further bathos, in fact – seems consummately done.) One hardly needs reminding that her poetry abounds in jokes: following a passage on Handel in 'The Frigate Pelican', '*Festina lente*' looks like an interesting musical notation; and her lists, which are conspicuously acts of writing gathering up items of the real, clown the world into words. At the same time, 'heroically', they involve it in artistry, they employ the dumbest means of describing the world yet transfigure it with unflagging eloquence, since with Marianne Moore even lists are stylish, and docile to numbers.

Which brings one to her prosody, and more particularly to her syllabics. Syllabic verse is an evident changing of the world, which it

measures and numbers. The numbering even draws attention to itself more than in conventional verse: its order is not that of a known regularity already present within a tradition and referring to a wider system, but of an internally devised regularity peculiar to each poem; and its numerals are self-conscious in a way that the '14' and '10' of the sonnet, say, and the calculating of its line-groupings, are not. Even the devices by which, in our reading of a poem, she sometimes causes us to hasten over a line-ending, work also in that direction, since to end a line with a minor word or to break a word over an enjambment clearly points to the syllable-count as a constraint. Her technique, most evidently in her lengthy descriptions disposing detail after detail in a kind of prosodic joy, transposes the world, if not into a state of grace at least into one of elegance and newness. It too, however, contributes to the burlesque: don't the numbers go, just slightly, over the top? Isn't the high seriousness of the writing the suggestion that our forms, our aesthetic transfigurations, are vulnerable and even rather comic, and that it would be correct if, while we delighted in them, we also saw the joke?

* * *

Marianne Moore certainly had her own way of writing Christian poetry – if indeed it is that. She goes about her business, and only occasionally drops an indication of the religious view that is sustaining her. The indications are not necessarily oblique or tentative; on the contrary, she can surprise by an air of making major claims about life with little supporting evidence. The reader stumbles rather suddenly on passages such as this, in 'To a Giraffe':

> existence
>
> is flawed; transcendence, conditional;
> "the journey from sin to redemption, perpetual."

The same is true of her glancing at the world in its fallen condition. 'The Hero' does open with a 'creepy' vision of snakes' 'hypodermic teeth', a neglected yew, the 'twin yellow / eyes' of an owl; and it does close with the Negro and with a hero who, by saying, 'It is not what I eat that is / my natural meat', seems to be a pilgrim echoing Christ's words, 'I have meat to eat that ye know not of .... My meat is to do the will of him that sent me' (John 4:32 and 34).

Nevertheless, its central and far-reaching declaration, about 'hope not being hope / until all ground for hope has / vanished', emerges without any exploration of that vanishing, and groundlessness.

Or is this a form of discretion? Objecting to what he considers her consolatory way of dealing with evil, Randall Jarrell dubs her animal and plant poetry 'this last version of pastoral';[7] in a letter to William Carlos Williams of 11 September 1920, Pound calls her attitude to what doesn't please her a 'spinsterly aversion'. These are powerful voices, and they may be right. Yet the refusal to go down into sin and despair seems to imply, with courtesy and toughness, that one already knows what is wrong, even if one doesn't regularly attend a Presbyterian church and read *The Expositor's Bible* and studies of the Old Testament poets. 'The Steeple-Jack', by moving smoothly past stranded whales, a storm that 'disturbs stars in the sky', sin-driven senators and 'Danger' on its way to the final word, 'hope', seems to ironise by its own blandness about the blandness of the town which, for all its qualities and because it has 'cats' and 'not cobras', could do with being alerted.[8] The discretion does mean that her 'piercing glances into the life of things' fail to illumine many areas, and we would not look to her for a deeper understanding of the Fall, unless by implication. It also means, however, that she keeps her attention on what positively matters, leaving the rest to brief notations.

Besides, the moments in her poetry that strain for the invisible are accompanied by others that are content with the splendour or glory of the visible. 'The Pangolin' is central here. It asks why monks would have slaved to 'confuse' the many meanings of grace, binding the worlds in a word, uniting apparently disparate matters all the way from elegance to 'the cure for sins' in a confusion which, one may think, it is a privilege to see, if 'that which is at all were not forever'. Why marry the visible to the invisible if only the invisible is eternal? 'That which is' is not love or anything else elevated, but first the pangolin, whose perfection and otherness have already led to the sudden exclamation:

> Sun and moon and day and night and man and beast
> each with a splendor
> which man in all his vileness cannot
> set aside; each with an excellence!

I take this to be another reworking of St Paul, specifically of 1 Corinthians 15:39–41: 'there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh

of beasts ... the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars'. The passage leads immediately into famous verses about natural bodies not being destroyed but being transformed into spiritual ones; her belief that what exists now will exist eternally is based on something more solid than sentimental hopefulness. So alongside the brimming of inner light it is the 'apparition of splendour', to quote one of her poem titles, that causes her to exclaim, as it does once more at the end of 'The Pangolin':

> "Again the sun!
> anew each day; and new and new and new,
> that comes into and steadies my soul."

For itself, her poetry does not claim a great deal; insofar as it is Christian writing, it sounds the world with all the devices of seeing at its disposal and works partial and self-critical changes on it. No doubt it is preferable for a Christian poet to leave matters to God, and to recognise that the essential has already been said. She was spared, after all, from being the maker of her own supreme fiction, by being a 'free ... captive' of 'supreme belief' ('Spenser's Ireland'). She accepts the conditional nature of transcendence, expressing the idea by quoting someone else's statement, with reference to Homer, and at the end of a poem addressed not to truth but to a giraffe; and she seems to take 'the being we call human' as living in a kind of interim, where the continual and patterned reappearance of the sun is a focal event. It can be experienced as a newness in the natural world, which may be the earnest of a larger renewal.

9

Yves Bonnefoy and the Obscure Possibility of the Earth

Near the beginning of Yves Bonnefoy's *Dans le leurre du seuil* of 1975, there are two lines,

> Et d'où ce souvenir qui serre le coeur
> De la barque d'un autre été au ras des herbes?

which might themselves, in their context, 'wring' or 'oppress' the heart. Word for word they go: 'And whence this memory that oppresses the heart / of the boat of another summer level with the grasses?', except that the French language can still manage *whence* without sounding archaic and, more importantly, the first line, occurring as it does in a verse paragraph of alexandrines and decasyllabics, is a kind of wounded alexandrine, its second half failing after the fifth of its expected six syllables. This is one of the ways in which Bonnefoy refuses to allow the poetry its perfection (the English iambic pentameter is less easily damaged, I fancy, without being destroyed), and I shall consider his reasons later. What is important for the moment is that boat at the limit of the earth and the water, unmoving though ready for movement, which owes its clarity yet also its mystery to the memory that causes it to appear. Memory isolates it in a patch of world at once unreal and more than real, where meaning too, in a summer that has become other, and there only, seems to brim. The simultaneous discovery of a present that is frozen in the past (of a place where, as in Eliot's 'Burnt Norton', amid 'laughter' children 'were playing in the foliage') and of 'so much joy' that is nevertheless 'preserved', seems to mark for Bonnefoy an origin of writing: a coincidence of the intuition of meaningful place and the realisation of its partial loss. Isn't some such experience, indeed, in differing forms, at the origin of all

writing, and all art? I am supposing that we all know, whatever the sign may be for each of us and however we interpret it, the prohibition of Eden in the successive glimpses of it that we are vouchsafed, the paradises through which we pass only to become aware, with Proust, that their nature is to be lost.

There is another experience of place more central to Bonnefoy's writing, and equally fundamental for writing in general. In 1972 he published a prose work, *L'Arrière-pays*, an autobiographical meditation (Bonnefoy always writes personally, and gives, for even the most theoretical subjects, the tone of their importance in an individual life) on the earth and on the images we make of it. The title might serve for the whole of his work. While its simple meaning is *The Hinterland*, he also draws from it the sense of a country mysteriously behind the land within view, an apparently more intense country just out of reach. The opening sentence: 'J'ai souvent éprouvé un sentiment d'inquiétude, à des carrefours' ('I have often experienced a feeling of disquiet, at cross-roads'), a magnetic beginning for a story, with a masterly pause, leads to the evocation of 'another country', a country 'of a higher nature' that was waiting somewhere along 'la voie que je n'ai pas prise', 'the path which I did not take'. A disquiet rather than an oppression of the heart, this equally troubled intrusion, which is a recurring event in Bonnefoy's poetry and prose, enables him to transform regret into a quest, into a kind of nostalgia for the future. It shows the essential purpose of his poetry, and perhaps of all poetry: to be an exploratory voyage through the possible of the world and also of language.

All his varied and prolific work is driven, as I suggested, by this conscious purpose. It is present in his four main volumes of poetry: *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*, published in 1953 when he was thirty, *Hier régnant désert* (1958), *Pierre écrite* (1965) and *Dans le leurre du seuil* (1975), which were gathered in 1978 into *Poèmes*, not strictly a Collected Poems but the single book in several parts towards which he had been working.[1] It also animates his narratives, his literary and his art criticism, and his teaching as Professor of Comparative Studies of the Poetic Function at the Collège de France. Part of the strength of all his writings is that they each derive from a few burning questions that he has asked over and again, questions that even stand behind his translations from Yeats and his several essays on translation, and that seem to be in the background of his numerous translations from Shakespeare.

Insofar as he is concerned with place, he shares common ground with many modern English and American poets, though part of the interest of his approach to place is that it is clearly and centrally French. Insofar as place for him is an earth poised between memory and desire, which both satisfies and dissatisfies, which is full or vacant according to the lights, and which is finally the only place given us to inhabit; and insofar as poetry, on such an earth, is the pursuit of 'salvation', for the self, for things, for human intercourse and for language, he is working within a broadly conceived Romantic tradition. As distinct from Eliot in particular, however, who was also exercised by 'the passage which we did not take / Towards the door we never opened', Bonnefoy refuses the Christian interpretation of loss and hope, although his poetry makes use of Christian terminology. His 'faith' is a confidence in the earth, and his poetry commits itself to that Romantic wager, of a sacred without God, a transcendence without a beyond, and, in displacing religion, it takes on a not inconsiderable burden and responsibility.

The 'sacred' is one of Bonnefoy's most urgent concerns, though it is envisaged in a purely terrestrial perspective. It is partly the perception of unity, of the gathering of the scattered; a powerful motif, of course, in the modern poetry of disinheritance, since it only requires a number of phenomena to appear to harmonise for their observer to believe that he is glimpsing Eden. Unity is often realised by a light, which is natural rather than otherworldly but which, according to the word Bonnefoy repeatedly uses of it, 'changes'. It may be Edenic, as in the first poem of *Pierre écrite*, where on a summer night the I-figure 'seems' to have actually entered the forbidden garden (with a conviction which subsequent poems qualify):

> Et le feuillage aussi brille sous le feuillage,
> Le vert, et l'orangé des fruits mûrs, s'est accru,
> Lampe d'un ange proche; un battement
> De lumière cachée prend l'arbre universel.

(*And the foliage also shines beneath the foliage, / the green, and the orange colour of the ripe fruit, has augmented, / the lamp of an angel close by; a beating / of hidden light catches the universal tree.*)[2]

As a demonstration of the focussed intent of all his writing, this is also his view of the role of perspective in Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della

Francesca. As distinct from Uccello, he argues, whose far-fetched and abstract use of perspective was a negation of finitude and the occultation rather than the metamorphosis of time, they 'did not deny the interiority of the object, its being, its transcendence of any conceptual description. Instead, they reassembled scattered clarity (*l'évidence éparse*), and brought into an experience of the senses the light and unity of the sacred. Perspective they had conceived ... as the means to this end, asking of it that it should delimit the horizon, seek out and give room to the possible, and disencumber the mind of preconceptions and chimeras'.[3] The passage brings into play many of the most warmly felt ideas on Bonnefoy's ontology.

The quality of the visible inexplicably quickens, and the world, one might say, goes up in light. The light, however, is more usually violent. It is the lightning of *Dans le leurre du seuil*:

> Les choses se rassemblent dans l'éclair
> Comme au lieu d'origine, et les chemins
> Luiraient dans les jardins de l'éclair ...
>
> ('Les Nuées')

(*Things spring together in the lightning flash / as in the place of origin, and the paths / would gleam in the gardens of the flash* ...)

It is the 'immédiateté orageuse', the 'storm-filled immediacy', that is a 'clairvoyance' in a painting by Poussin, and, in another, 'la foudre un jour immobilisée dans le ciel', 'the lightning bolt one day immobilised in the sky'.[4] It is also the bolt that accompanies Douve 'broken' from the opening page of her volume, and that marks the brevity, the menace, and perhaps the terror of the revelation of the sacred in a world that is no longer a peaceable garden.

The sacred is also a fire. Fire is everywhere in Bonnefoy, as are the other elements in the Empedoclean theory, and seems to be the figurative condition of the earth when, perceived by a consciousness that knows it to be mortal and consents to that finitude, it kindles with its own quasi-divine presence:

> Cet arbre nous suffit là-bas, qui, par lumière,
> Se délie de soi-même et ne sait plus
> Que le nom presque dit d'un dieu presque incarné.

Et tout ce haut pays que l'Un très proche brûle.

('Oui, c'est cela', *Pierre écrite*)

(*That tree suffices us over there, as, through light, / it loosens from itself and knows now only / the name almost pronounced of a god almost incarnate. / And all that high country that the One, looming, burns.*)

Hence the attraction for Bonnefoy of the salamander, since it shares with some of the creatures of Marianne Moore the quality of being both a fabulous animal, like his phoenix, and a real one, to be found in a French garden. In a famous poem, 'Lieu de la salamandre' in *Douve*, a salamander that 'tient au sol', or 'holds to the ground', also passes, for the mind observing it, through the flame. Rather than only destroying, fire also purifies (a sober etymological wordplay describes the traversing of flame as 'le mythe le plus pur', 'the purest myth') and is the place where the renewal of the physical world occurs. The Bible also envisages a renewal through fire; but whereas it foresees, beyond an apocalyptic conflagration, 'new heavens and a new earth', Bonnefoy conceives a kind of perpetual purgatory, though a joyful one, to be reached for here. As the earth kindles in the section 'La terre' of *Dans le leurre du seuil*, it is 'as if fire had caught fire'; another, intenser flame at once 'consumes' and 'celebrates', and allows the vision of

... toutes choses simples
Rétablies
Ici et là, sur leurs
Piliers de feu.

(*all simple things / refounded / here, and there, on their / columns of fire.*)

Bonnefoy does consider, in a poignant passage in his prose work *Rue Traversière* (page 52), another earth 'appearing gradually ... in the dispersion of the fire that will have devoured this one', but only as a 'dream'.

As the visible for Bonnefoy may be surprised by a light that is denser, hidden, or incendiary (which for others might be hints or fragments of the true Light), so it ignites with a fire that has become more acute, a fire universal yet so refined as to leave intact, a fire to

the power of fire (and a glimpse, perhaps, of the earth's end). And couldn't one also say, to fold in the metaphor, as it were, that a poem is itself a kind of flame, a tongue of fire, which a salamander-world enters so as to be consumed and celebrated, unnamed and named anew? A salamander surprised one day was the occasion, the 'lieu', for a certain poem; the 'lieu' or place of the salamander, as well as being a wall, a light from windows, and a human gaze, is also the poem which, by a reciprocal movement, produces the ordinary and yet extraordinary creature.

The sacred for Bonnefoy is also achieved when the earth opens in imagination to an angelic or a divine presence. An angel descends on several occasions in the *Poèmes*, as many angels have descended in poetry since the Romantics so as to compensate a higher Absence. Bonnefoy's resembles the 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans' of Wallace Stevens, that 'angel of reality' and 'necessary angel of earth' in whose sight one sees 'the earth again'. He is 'l'ange de vivre ici', 'the angel of living here', in a poem of *Hier régnant désert* ('Mais dans les arbres'), which, as is frequent in Bonnefoy's poetry, is reworked in the poem with the angel from *Pierre écrite* that I quoted when discussing light. He is quite explicitly, in *Pierre écrite*'s penultimate poem, an appropriation for terrestrial ends of the angel of the Lord who appeared to Moses in a bush:

> Oui, je puis vivre ici. L'ange, qui est la terre,
> Va dans chaque buisson et paraître et brûler.

(*Yes, I can live here. The angel, who is the earth, / is going in each bush to appear and to burn.*)

He is not the sign of a celestial beyond but a kind of angelic possibility, a destiny in light and fire, of the familiar earth.

A god (or gods, or a divine quality) is even more frequently perceived; he too becomes consubstantial with the earth. In a line from 'La patience, le ciel' (*Pierre écrite*): 'Le temps divin qu'il faut pour emplir ce vase', 'The divine time needed to fill this vase', it is as though time itself, the essential condition of our mortality, while expanding so as to achieve a movement which is also an immobility, deepens, changes, takes on divinity. It thereby transfigures, lightly but perfectly and without in any way damaging them, a common vase and the act of pouring. (The line and its implications remind one of Vermeer's *Maidservant Pouring Milk*', and the inward eternity

of its falling liquid, though surprisingly, among all the painters whom Bonnefoy has pondered Vermeer seems not to have attracted his attention.) His meaning for 'God', however, is best conveyed in 'La lumière, changée' of a few pages later, a focal moment of his writing and of his endeavour to relocate the heavenly in the earthly, a valedictory poem which hesitates on the edge of unbelief, and which I shall quote entire:

> Nous ne nous voyons plus dans la même lumière,
> Nous n'avons plus les mêmes yeux, les mêmes mains.
> L'arbre est plus proche et la voix des sources plus vive,
> Nos pas sont plus profonds, parmi les morts.
>
> Dieu qui n'est pas, pose ta main sur notre épaule,
> Ebauche notre corps du poids de ton retour,
> Achève de mêler à nos âmes ces astres,
> Ces bois, ces cris d'oiseaux, ces ombres et ces jours.
>
> Renonce-toi en nous comme un fruit se déchire,
> Efface-nous en toi. Découvre-nous
> Le sens mystérieux de ce qui n'est que simple,
> Et fût tombé sans feu dans des mots sans amour.

(*We no longer see each other in the same light, / we no longer have the same eyes, the same hands. / The tree is closer and the voice of springs more quick, / our steps go deeper, among the dead. / God who art not, lay your hand on our shoulder, / rough-shape our body with the weight of your return, / mingle with our souls at last these stars, / these woods, these bird calls, these shadows and these lights. / Renounce yourself in us as a fruit is torn, / efface us in yourself. Reveal to us / the mysterious meaning of what is only simple, / and would have fallen without fire in words without love.*)

The sacred is a kind of godliness of the earth and of its creatures, which is revealed beyond the inert appearances submitted to by our customary selves (and also beyond the poetic images that evoke it, of which more later). It is the experience of 'presence', a vibrant and even more central idea which seems to be Bonnefoy's grateful rejoinder to Mallarmé's 'absence', and which he has expounded in an essay on 'La poésie française et le principe d'identité' in *L'Improbable*. A salamander is again the occasion, sighted on the wall

of a ruined house. As the observer analyses it, distinguishing its parts and separating it from other phenomena, treating it as an object of science structured by reason and penetrated by language, it suddenly becomes enigmatic, unnameable, a bundle of dissociated aspects and concepts, and one is left staring at 'that outline of a leg – absolute, irrefutable, desolate'. What is missing is a sense of the salamander itself, of what it inwardly is, of where it has come from to be there in this encounter. Bonnefoy calls this retreat of meaning, this stubborn silence of the world, 'mauvaise présence', a false or evil presence, in which it seems that the realities most familiar to us are merely being mimed, as it were, by nothingness, in a kind of demonic temptation. To experience it is to undergo the idea of death.

I find this a powerful rendering of what in Christian terms is the meeting of a fallen world, in which one is indeed tempted to acquiesce, and where at certain moments one is also given to see (for I believe that it *is* a gift, and the beginning, in fact, of another possibility) that things detach themselves from human words and, more fearfully, that they withdraw, that they are absent from themselves, just at the moment when it is their being that one wants to reach, in the discovery of one's own being. To become aware of being (I know no other name, in the face of contemporary scepticism, for whatever, even in the most inanimate object, is not any of its attributes but lies within or behind them all) means simultaneously, as Bonnefoy confirms, to become aware of non-being, of death; to discern, again, both Eden and its loss.

True presence supervenes with an equal suddenness, through an experience difficult to grasp and, according to Bonnefoy himself, 'hardly sayable'. It seems to be an act of singular empathy, of almost mystical transfer: 'It is as though I had accepted, *lived*, that salamander'. As a result, everything is renewed. A disjoined, exteriorised real 'gathers itself', and the salamander becomes 'the softly beating heart of the earth'; no longer one among numberless aspects, it is now 'the origin of what is'. Its essence 'has spread into the essence of the things surrounding it, like the flow of an analogy' through which the mind perceives everything 'in the continuity and sufficiency of a *place*, and in the transparence of *unity*'. The invisible is glimpsed, moreover, and not as something other than the visible but as the 'indissociable' into which the particular forms of the visible have dissolved; while the salamander further becomes 'the angel' that has driven out the demons, the unique angel in this revelation of the One.

In procuring presence, the creature has also changed from being *a* salamander, rather than a hearth, or a swallow, to being *the* salamander, by which I assume Bonnefoy to mean that it resembles such 'essences' as *le feu* and *la pierre* which, when accompanied in French by the definitie article, as well as designating the abstract concept of fire and stone can evoke, he claims, the presence of fire and stone within the horizon of one's life. *Le feu* is even 'a god, active, endowed with powers'. We should need to make the grammatical point differently in English, of course, if we chose to, and to go from 'a salamander' to 'salamander', as we go from 'a fire' to 'fire'.

Bonnefoy's position here is very close to that of the Catholic Pierre Emmanuel (it is also a displacement, presumably, of the doctrine of the Real Presence); and it repudiates *La Nausée*, whose vocabulary it uses while offering a 'salvation' and a 'justification' of the self and the world quite different from Sartre's aesthetic solution in that early work. It is not, however, triumphalist: presence is not reestablished by a wave of the imagination, but only 'begins to appear'. Were it otherwise, the Fall could be overcome by an adjustment of vision, and we might by our own efforts, or suspension of effort, gain something like 'epiphany' or 'satori' as a permanent possession. The experience of death remains, and, even more clearly than in the salamander, is fundamental to Douve, the earliest emblem of presence in Bonnefoy's poetry and the centre of gravity of his first book. Douve is a deliberately mysterious figure, whom one must avoid laying out cold by dint of exposition. Insofar as she is a personage, but she is hardly that, she seems to be, for the masculine poet, the world under a feminine sign, the universal object at once of memory and of desire, the Woman who penetrates reality and in particular the physical world (she is 'lande', 'rivière', 'falaise'; heath, river, cliff) so as to assemble in herself all a man's hopes for his relationships, with himself, with others, with the earth, with language and poetry. One thinks, through all the differences, of Hardy's Emma. Being 'Douve', however, and so, if one takes the word at its simplest, a 'moat', she is not quite, or not only, the Lady, or the Castle, but the difficult water that one must cross so as to gain access. Furthermore, she suffers extreme violence, 'breaking' and 'dying' in the very first poem, and fragmenting in the eighth:

A présent se disloquent les menuiseries faciales. A présent l'on procède à l'arrachement de la vue.

(*Now the facial carpentries are dislocated. Now one proceeds to the tearing-out of sight.*)

She is above all mortal, and in her mortality she involves the death of her lover and the death of the whole of his world: she is 'Fontaine de ma mort présente insoutenable', 'fountain of my present death, unbearable' (poem XI). Continually coming to birth and continually dying, she glows with epiphanic presence while disclosing the mortality by whose acknowledgement epiphany is attained. Like the *ptyx* of Mallarmé in the sonnet beginning 'Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx', whose Greek etymology suggests, as does that of *douve*, a form of recipient, this name outside of all names intimates a plenitude of being to be won from non-being.

To be a name, or a naming, is in fact essential to her role. The word 'Douve' is almost magically polyvalent. It contains, as well as the 'ouvert' ('open') and 'avenir' ('future') that Bonnefoy mentions,[5] the adverbs of origin and of desire ('d'où' and 'où', 'whence' and 'where'), an allusion to the Christian name of the poet who is drawn into this quest, an anticipation of the 'divine', and the incipient 'mouvement' that the word marries by its sonority in the title of the volume. As a feminine word to which the poet aspires by pronouncing it, Douve is also language, and the way to language; poetry, and the poetic process. She could easily become a concept, or an idol, and so her polysemy (there are further meanings) is made inexhaustible. Beyond all one's separate readings, she remains a mysterious, simple, and irreducible word.

The feminine figure in love poetry, who is often displaced in one way or another from any biographical source, usually opens, it seems, to this kind of large significance. One remembers Stevens's statement in the 'Adagia' of *Opus posthumous*: 'A poet looks at the world as a man looks at a woman', the reciprocal of which is that a poet looks at a woman as a man looks at the world. This is clear with Beatrice and with Laura; in one of Ronsard's poems to Marie ('Comme on voit sur la branche au mois de mai la rose'), the poet accomplishes certain rites so that her body, in death as in life, should be 'nothing but roses', while Cassandra, in his celebrated

'Ode à Cassandre', focusses a vision of the whole of Nature transformed from a mother to a cruel step-mother. Once she is lost to him, Beatrice enables Dante to pass through death and so find paradise, in accordance with the Christian progress. As I suggested, however, Douve, who is closer to 'doute' or 'doubt' than to 'beatitude', allows entry to presence not beyond death but within it. By her unceasing death and unceasing revival she fleshes the Hegelian epigraph to the book of which she is the heroine: 'But the life of the mind [or of the spirit] is not one to be alarmed at death and to keep itself pure of it. It is the life that endures death and sustains itself there'. Douve is the 'ordeal' of the poet, to use a word Bonnefoy has favoured, the process by which he confronts the mortality of the world and his desire for another, so as to reaffirm his faith in 'l'obscur possible terrestre', 'obscure, terrestrial possibility'.[6] And so she also figures the sacred, as Bonnefoy understands it: she is the earth accomplished, not by being opened to presences that are other and that come from elsewhere but by opening to its own deepest, religious, virtuality.

The traversing of death is also fundamental to his last volume, *Dans le leurre du seuil,* and is undertaken this time by a masculine figure. He is at once the boatman in Poussin's *Moïse sauvé des eaux* in the Louvre, and Charon, the ferryman of Hades. He poles, through the death of the physical world, of the self, of language, of the book, towards the farther shore of real life and of the word. As with Douve, however, rather than crossing into another world he delves further into this one, into the acceptance of a human condition made more alive in its mortality.

* * *

Since presence, divinity, the sacred, are to be found in this world, it is clear that 'l'arrière-pays' is ambivalent. In one sense it is a temptation. Indeed, part of the importance of Bonnefoy in modern poetry and in reflection on poetry lies in the force but also the scruple with which he evokes a hinterland, sighting it as the place to aim for yet insisting that this 'other world' be nevertheless a world 'of flesh and of time, like our own'[7] – that the promised land should be the earth. Similarly, the 'threshold' of *Dans le leurre du seuil* seems to beckon into another place and another speech, yet being a 'leurre' it is at once a lure, an allurement, and a deceit; the wisdom that the book learns is to refrain from either passing

through or renouncing, and to remain 'within' the threshold and its ambiguity.

If Bonnefoy refuses to be satisfied, as a poet and as a man, with a neutral real and with inert words, neither does he surrender himself to a surreal of the world and of language. Hence his distinction between the 'artist' and the 'poet'. The artist is the writer who stays with the images he has made, and therefore with the self as it is already constituted, whereas the poet transgresses his text, partly, in Bonnefoy's case, by wounding his prosody, since he recognises the danger as well as the potential that it represents for his relation to the earth and to others and for his constitution of himself. Bonnefoy also notes, nevertheless, that the artist is the 'intimate ... obscure double of the poet'.[8]

And yet, although he even calls the *hinterland* at one point a 'demonic ... phantasm',[9] it is clearly more than a temptation to be rejected. The power of the opening of *L'Arrière-pays* is a sign of its genuine appeal, as are the haunting evocations of the hinterland that follow, in the writer's encounters with places, paintings, objects, in dreams also, and even in the Latin language: evocations of great beauty and conviction, and which are after all the substance of this major, not to say central, work. No one who can write: 'it only needs something to move me – and it can be the humblest of things, a pewter spoon, a rusty tin with antiquated decoration, a garden glimpsed through a hedge, a rake standing against a wall, the singing of a maid in the next room – and being cleaves, and its light, and I am in exile' (page 21), is likely to forget that disturbance; and it is not surprising that the moments when he reaches a belief that the place he is looking for is 'here' are precisely those when 'the idea of the other country may lay hold of me with most violence, and deprive me of all joy in the earth' (page 8). It is from 'là-bas', moreover, from 'over there', that we have learnt 'the arts, poetry, techniques of negation, intensification, memory' (page 25), so that art exists *because* of our exile, *because* of our intuition of a hinterland. (To appreciate the bearing of this one might confront it with Pope's advice to architects and gardeners to collaborate with the genius of the place.) To write is in one way or another to acknowledge the *arrière-pays*; and yet at the same time, how challenging is his anguish at what is lost in the desire for another world, in the dream of an 'absolute revolution': 'si je rêve cela, que m'est la lumière d'ici, ou d'aujourd'hui ... ?', 'if I dream that, what meaning can the light of here have for me, or of today?' (page 20). The only

satisfying issue, as Bonnefoy formulates it over and again, would be for the hinterland, which is only ever just slightly different from the world we know, to enter the here and now, for there to be a 'redoubling of being in the intensity of its appearances' (page 18), for transcendence to be rooted in a place (page 40), for our terrestrial condition to achieve a kind of Incarnation (page 56), for 'here and elsewhere' to be 'united' (page 128).

So *L'Arrière-pays* ends with the wish to transport the 'dream' from texts into one's life, to allow the hinterland to disperse and then form again in the becoming of an existence lived in time. In the movement of the poetry itself it is the known world that appears, essentialised, it is true, and mythic, but illuminated and burning with a kind of pre-Socratic mystery. Yet the poetry, as the prose, is continually solicited by the hinterland: why cannot Bonnefoy finally exorcise it? In part, surely, because he is right in discerning the depth of the world's alienation. Considering the failed earth in the perspective of its possible renewal, in the passage of *Rue Traversière* from which I quoted earlier, he writes: 'But there was that dark stain in the bounding of animals, that thorn in bouquets. It was the mother that we failed to love as we ought, with abandon, and so we had languages, history, books and works of art, thought: all that abstraction, that fever thriving on enigma ... ' So much prestigious activity is seen here as the mere consequence of our exile, of the fact, as Rimbaud put it once and for all, that 'we are not in the world'. One is almost with Pascal, and his definition of human business, in the light of the need to find God, as 'diversion'. If Bonnefoy is correct in assuming that this life is the only one, that 'what is, is finitude', as we ourselves are 'at once the absolute of an instant and a chance that no divine plan explains or will finally transfigure',[10] and especially if the only resources are our own, it must be true that we need particular care in responding to the world's 'malheur', so as not to be impelled into an impossible flight from the earth. But don't we also want to know *why* we 'fail to love as we ought', why, as he rightly maintains, our 'endless speech' should be 'a matter as vain and repetitive as sea-spray, sand, or all those vacant stars' and the 'sign' a 'wretchedness';[11] why, indeed, the earth needs to be 'saved', and why the human condition is such that we intuit a hinterland, a threshold? The Christian answer, to do with having fallen from God and from Eden and with labouring in the expectation of redemption, comes somewhat easily by now, but it may also be accurate. In that case *l'arrière-pays* will have a precise meaning and its appeal will be salutary.

A Christian intrusion into Bonnefoy's poetics, having begun by acknowledging all that a Christian poetry, and maybe a Christian practice of life, can learn from him, would argue that the world is both an exile from Eden and also the creation of God and the object of his concern; and that the Christian journey is not away from the world but towards the world transfigured, towards the earth as a province of the 'kingdom of heaven'. Bonnefoy's own reading of Christianity seems to be restricted to a particular Catholic tradition, which includes a 'doloristic conception ... of charity'[12] that he sees as running counter to the possibility of charity or love as joy, feast and festival – a strange conception indeed to anyone who has responded to St Paul's invitation, 'Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice' (Philippians 4:4), or to Purcell's setting. The hinterland would certainly be an 'excarnation' – a powerful term that repays, I have found, as do all the terms in Bonnefoy's incessant, tragic and utterly serious exploration, continual and repeated meditating – if the other world to be sought were a flagrant denial of this one; it might well be, along with the arts that promote it, a demonic temptation. This is not the case, however, if the hinterland is this world recreated. Such a recreation is, of course, in rather different terms, precisely what Bonnefoy aspires to, and I suppose the sadness of his work is that there is nothing to sanction his hope beyond his own hopefulness and 'confidence'.

At the centre of his thinking is a hesitation between 'incarnation' and the 'hidden god', the latter an expression of Isaiah's that has particular resonance in France through Pascal's famous probing of it.[13] He has good reason to believe that in preferring incarnation he is opposing what may well be the most tenacious and widespread Christian tradition, that which, under the influence less of the Bible than of Neoplatonism, despairs of 'the world' and places its hope in a 'heaven' that is thoroughly different and that in the fullness of time will supersede it. Yet if one could believe in both incarnation and a God who hides himself (and isn't this, after all, the biblical view?) there would be an answer to his disquiet and his desire. A God both incarnate and hidden would justify our love of this world and also our need for a world renewed, really other and otherwise real; a God absent yet present would be the promise of that renewal. Poetry, as the successor to Adam's language once capable of naming perfectly a world that was 'good', would still be the contradiction or counter–diction of a fallen world, but it would also be a bid to collaborate in its renaming. It would remain the language, as it

were, of Saturday, uttered between the Friday of death and the Sunday of a resurrection for whose final accomplishment we must still wait, and Bonnefoy's reservations would quite properly restrain one from idolising it; yet it would direct confidence towards a future world and a future Word. (Transcendence, one might then say, is to be found in a Man who walked on the earth.)

Bonnefoy's unwillingness either to accept or to reject the *arrière-pays* is shown best and most recently in the figure of the reflection. There are numerous reflections in his poetry, and they are associated with its continual search for a 'way', its exploration of 'voie', 'chemin', 'route', of 'path', 'road', and 'route'. One such reflection is the place where the word *sens* is unfolded into two of its senses, to signify at one and the same time the desired 'meaning' and the 'direction' that would lead towards it. Bonnefoy indicates as much, in fact, in the course of an important and unusual act of self-translation, a rendering into English of the whole of the section 'Dans le leurre du seuil' in the book of the same name, which was published in a special number of the review *Prospice* devoted to *French Poetry Now* (1975). At the moment when a hand sorting grain from tares is doubled by its reflection on the surface of a table 'où le sens / Soudain se forme', one actually expects it to be 'meaning' that 'suddenly forms' there, whereas in Bonnefoy's more suggestive translation it is 'the way'.

Doesn't the reflection, which leads in this case 'through the wood's dark water' to an enigmatic domain that is not exactly the world but that is not situated outside the world either, create for Bonnefoy's poetry a kind of interior opening, as the 'threshold' of an inward 'hinterland'? As a figure, one might say, of the otherness of the same, it offers an authentic transcendence. It is true that in *Pierre écrite* the reflection resembles the threshold and the hinterland in being affirmed only to be called in question. The glimpsed other world, for example a star in water, 'changes' the earth, but since it belongs to dream one must also wake away from it, so that shortly afterwards 'In the waters of the sleeper the lights blur', and by the end of the book 'Imagining / has torn in the mirror'.[14] A poem of the earlier *Hier régnant désert*, however, 'A San Francesco, le soir', had evoked the marble floor of a church in Italy, that one might have taken for 'une eau calme où de doubles lumières / Portaient au loin les voix des cierges et du soir', 'a calm water where redoubled lights / bore far away the voices of candles and of evening', which Bonnefoy had acknowledged to be a mirage but only by exclaiming:

'ainsi de nos autres mirages, / O fastes dans nos coeurs, ô durables flambeaux!', 'so it is too with our other mirages, / oh solemnities of the heart, oh enduring torches!' In *Dans le leurre du seuil*, reflections are not even illusory, but offer a world both other and true.

The book opens with an awakening to a view, of a tree, the parapet of a terrace, masses of clear saffran in a gully, all of which quiver slightly, 'perhaps' as the reflection 'of other trees and of other stones in a river'. The river will be one of the book's dominant figures, both the Styx associated with the first of the main 'characters', Charon the ferryman, and the Nile on whose waters Moses the second character, the 'divine' child who offers exodus into a redeemed future, is surrounded by reflections of a possible world. (The scenario, and in fact a great deal of *Dans le leurre du seuil*, derives from the Poussin painting referred to already in connection with the ferryman: Bonnefoy has taken the boatman to the left of the picture for Charon and the exploration of death, Moses for the promise of rebirth, and the river as the place where a fresh world is visible, so poising the painting and his own book, as indicated in the Shakespearean epigraph, between death and new life.) In the waters where 'there bathes in simplicity the child / who carries the world' (*Poèmes*, page 258) the poet conceives, indeed, a whole new creation, and addresses it with the vocative so frequent in his writing and so appropriate to it:

O gerbes du reflet
Malgré la boue,
Seuil dans le froissement
De l'eau fermée,
Branches at fruits qui passent
L'eau maçonnée!

Oui, tu es ce pays,
Toi que j'éveille
Comme dans l'eau qu'on trouble, même de nuit,
Le ciel est autre.

Bouge dans l'eau remuée
L'arbre d'étoiles.
Prend, dans le souffle accru,
L'autre lumière.

(*Poèmes*, pp. 255–6)

(*Oh sheafs of the reflection / despite the mud, / threshold in the ruffling / of the closed water, / branches and fruits traversing / the walled up water! / Yes, you are that country, / you that I wake / as in water one disturbs, even by night, / the sky is other. / Moves, in the stirred water, / the tree of stars. / Catches, in the increase of breath, / the other light.*)

Even a 'child sun' shines 'on a dark water' (page 272), as if the childhood promise of Moses the saved one and the saviour has extended to the source of light, to a heavenly body perfectly real yet reflected in its virtuality.

Even here, however, Bonnefoy submits reflection to his customary vigilance. The closing pages of *Dans le leurre du seuil* gather his major figures, again in a way reminiscent of *Four Quartets* (a poem whose impingement is quite extensive), but also review and, as it were, temper them. A lightning bolt is now 'stopped / on the ford of the sky' and opens 'Sur l'abondance de la terre aux fruits obscurs', 'on to the abundance of earth and its dark fruits' (page 326). Fire becomes the difficult process of the earth itself: 'La terre est comme un feu de branches mouillées, / Le feu, comme une terre apercue en rêve', 'Earth is like a fire of still wet branches, / fire, like an earth caught sight of in a dream' (page 328). Finally, as the 'wing of the impossible' is 'folded back', the largeness of reflected vision is deliberately diminished. Pharaoh's daughter has already been replaced by an ordinary woman seen in a mirror whose silvering is 'torn' (page 318); now, in a sudden jump-cut recalling the dismissal of the seas in Rimbaud's 'The Drunken Boat for a 'puddle, black and cold', the Nile is likewise superseded. The last lines of the book, and hence of the *Poèmes*, focus on

> Les mots comme le ciel
> Aujourd'hui,
> Quelque chose qui s'assemble, qui se disperse.
>
> Les mots comme le ciel,
> Infini
> Mais tout entier soudain dans la flaque brève.

(*Words like the sky / today, / something that assembles, that disperses. / Words like the sky, / infinite / but suddenly all there in the brief puddle.*)

A reflection proposes not unknown forms and colours but the ordinary world in a puzzling version; it figures an otherness of the world that, while being quite unattainable, is also the least imaginary. Bonnefoy might have finally discarded it, in favour of a direct observing of things, but instead allowed it almost to obsess the plot of *Dans le leurre du seuil*. He seems to accept it as a kind of internal echo, rather like the actual echo described at one point as being 'not around the noise but in the noise' (page 249); and although at the close he certainly reduces it, it remains nevertheless, as something small and vulnerable. His poetry so far ends, indeed, with a picture of the simple, which joins his celebration in the prose works of 'the sole threshold of the absolute' afforded by a 'commonplace object, truly cared for as such', and of the 'word' that is as 'common' and 'shareable' as the bread and wine of communion.[15] (One might recall here the so-English Wordsworth, and his concern in line 230 of *The Prelude* for 'Truth that cherishes our daily life'.) Yet that view of a puddle is also a vision of the night sky. It is, to be sure, a perfect exit from the poetry, which would become 'art' were one to remain within it, into the everyday at its most humble. One reading of the concluding lines would even be that the reflected heavens are only accepted insofar as they are replaced by ordinary, natural and life-giving water made more radiant by their touch; that the eternal is available only in the passing moment seized in its ephemerality. Yet the eye continues to look – albeit downwards to the earth rather than upwards to the sky – gazing both at and through the visible, into and further than what is there; as if, while calling on himself to be satisfied, Bonnefoy were still searching, being among those who cannot help but 'seek a country'.

10

Charles Tomlinson's Seeing and Believing

Seeing, according to the title of Tomlinson's first full-length collection, is believing, but hasn't his point been missed? Not only is this more than a demand for evidence: the stress falls quite as much on the believing as on the seeing, for the adage has been sounded and then reversed. It declares, surely, in the light of the poems that follow, that what is achieved in seeing well is a kind of belief. Surprisingly, therefore, the poetry of this non-Christian will be partly concerned with the question of belief, in its relation to sight; and the concern appears to be increasing.

Seeing is clearly momentous for Tomlinson, no less than a matter, as far as one's being in the world is concerned, of life or death. The whole of the self, mind, body and whatever else we are, is involved, and judged, in the act of seeing, and to see as one should (the obligations of seeing mingling indissolubly with its delights) is to enter a relationship with the other, to be measured and called out. Commentators are well aware of this seeing, but they don't consider it religious, whereas Tomlinson does. In the course of his lecture 'The Poet as Painter' (reprinted in *Eden*), he discusses the use in his early poetry of 'the artistic ethic of Cézanne', an ethic 'distrustful of the drama of personality' and capable of rescuing and celebrating 'the paradisal aspect of the visual', and adds: 'It seemed to me a sort of religion'. The term is loosely applied – the discipline and the outward-seeking energy do not lead, after all, to an encounter with any god – but it does seem legitimate. The burden of Tomlinson's poetry is the need to 'know thyself' in relation rather than in the privacy of selfconsciousness, and to deal with self by becoming a kind of personal-impersonal 'one'. There is a quite remarkable sentence at the opening of his essay 'To begin: Notes on Graphics' (from *In Black and White*), where he sets out an objective: 'To begin beyond the self. ... To reconcile the I that is and the I that I am.' 'The I that is'. ... If I have understood him, he is distinguishing the *I*

experienced in the first person, in the 'I am' of self-awareness, and a third-person *I* known to be there, as an existence among others, inhabiting the world on a level with 'paint, water and paper'. This is not the Christian view of the person, of a man fallen from himself yet existing potentially as an utterly changed 'new man' (where the perfect statement is surely St Paul's 'by the grace of God I am what I am', in 1 Corinthians 15:10); yet while that view is not difficult to repeat, Tomlinson is genuinely exploring the question, and his aim is equally demanding in terms of vigilance and abstention. His words continue to turn in the mind, jostling with Rimbaud's 'JE est un autre', and represent a wisdom to which the religious would do well to attend. They suggest, to a reader so inclined, that one might know oneself as other, as 'one' among many, as of concern not to oneself but to God. There is, I presume, a strong religious impulse in this recent stanza:

> this script that untangles itself
> out of wind, briars, stars unseen,
> keeps telling me what I mean
> is theirs, not mine.
>
> ('Poem', *The Flood*)

Intensity issues from wordplay, from the double syntax made possible by the omission, habitual with Tomlinson, of 'that' ('telling me *that* ... ') and from the double sense of 'what I mean'. It is already a severe lesson for a poet to acknowledge that the meanings he makes belong not to him but to the poem where they are made and, more importantly, to the world from which his writing 'untangles' itself. (Consider, nevertheless, how one is released by that consent.) It is a harsh lesson for a man to realise that his own meaning, 'what he means', is not in himself but out there, with the wind, briars, unseen stars.

For Tomlinson, in fact, 'who am I?' is less decisive than 'where am I?' On the most everyday level, and this *is* in part a poetry of daily living, his writing explores what it is like to dwell in a house, to drive a car; how one's perpetually changing surroundings impinge on the mind and its senses. So as to register those changes, and to convey the activity rather than passive stance of the person in the landscape – and also, no doubt, because that's what he noticed – many of the poems are about being in motion, about walking,

driving, flying even. (*Notes from New York* opens and closes with the aerial views that have for the first time become commonplace for poets of Tomlinson's generation.) Yet the desire from the beginning has been to salute not merely a world outside but, after a diuturnity of the cult of inwardness, a 'reign of outwardness' ('A Prelude', *A Peopled Landscape*). A Christian will presumably concur in this concern for the actualities and reciprocations of place, since the world is God's and a way to the intuition of paradise; and the word 'reign', which joins 'kingdom' in the subliminal ontological politics of Tomlinson's vocabulary, indicates that this poetry which is quite oblique to Christianity nevertheless enters that profounder dimension of place, of being somewhere.

For one thing, his poems often report, and as it were effect, a waking to a world suddenly there, with a conviction of discovering Eden. Reflected sunbeams from water on the floor of his flooded cottage lead past the Fall and its consequences: 'Primeval light undated the day / Back into origin, washed past stain / And staleness, to a beginning glimmer' ('The Flood', in the volume of the same name). Or mountains seen one morning that on other mornings are invisible seem the re-enactment of Creation:

> Light touches the sense awake,
> First fiat crossing the aeons to an eye
> That sees it is still good, its touch a healing
> Where yesterday revealed at this turn of the hill
> Only a void and formlessness of sky.
>
> ('At a Glance', *Notes from New York*)

He writes often of this light, and it may be his painter's eye that sees it. Yet although he refers in 'The Poet as Painter' to the 'bringing of things to stand in the light of origin' as the basic project of his writing, such glimpses of Eden are occasional, and differ from the assumption about Edenic light in Pope. Moreover, while the intention of his poetry, like Wordsworth's, is restorative, its dynamic, again like Wordsworth's, faces the future, specifically in terms of sudden openings-out of time. To return to the early poems after reading the latest is to realise that those moments have always existed, and that they too have a religious bearing. The initial poem of *Seeing is Believing* itself, 'The Atlantic', having described, one might have thought, the tide coming in, concludes: 'That which we

were, / Confronted by all that we are not, / Grasps in subservience its replenishment.' In the abrupt change, or conversion, from 'that which we were', provoked almost in the twinkling of an eye by an act of absorbed attention, of seeing and saying, comes not exactly a new self but a vision of possibility, where 'all that we are not' means, as well as ocean, sun, shore and wind over against one, the scope of what one might be. If Tomlinson's poetry reaffirms Blake's 'As a man is So he Sees',[1] it also argues that as a man sees, so he becomes. In the second poem of the enlarged edition, 'Winter Encounters', it is the non-human world as well as the self that is launched into futurity: 'There is a riding-forth, a voyage impending/ In this ruffled air, where all moves ...' The world stirs forward, instinct with becoming, as if recreation, in Tomlinson's non-Christian understanding of it, were occurring here and now. And while the ruffled air, unlike Wordsworth's gentle breeze, carries no intimation of spirit, the closing lines do open to something more than physical: 'One feels behind / Into the intensity that bodies through them / Calmness within the wind, the warmth in cold.' What 'bodies through' in this verbally active incarnation: intensity, calmness, and warmth, remains undefined, yet, though it is certainly not supernatural, it doesn't seem entirely natural either.

There is a pointed challenge here, in the fact that Tomlinson emphasises our power over the world rather less than the power of the world to awaken us. In a book where I am considering poetry and change, it is right that one should encounter a poet who cries out for the recognition not only of the otherness but of the greater worth of what is not ourselves. Only when the light of the mind has been acknowledged to be poorer than the light out there (as it is in 'Of Beginning Light' from *Written on Water*) can it offer to renew the world in its own space. Tomlinson prompts the thought that the Christian needs to agree more than anyone (and the Christian poet most of all) that the authority of God's world and its ability to rouse us is indeed of more significance than our ability to rouse and recreate the world. One needs to take the full force, moral and spiritual, of his comment about fishing which is so much more than a comment about fishing, where what is required is 'just learning to sit still and keep your shadow off the water'.[2]

To see is to believe, to sight a world in its paradisal possibility and also to place the self. It is the possibility that most concerns me here, and since, in this poet who appears simple or at least straightforward because his poems usually say what they mean, its observing

is in fact very complex, to explore it further we shall need to advance carefully. Chance is obviously of importance, and seems to replace, in the Christian scheme, both inspiration and providence. It is inspiration and providence. It is inspiration when it prompts and then binds the writer with the fortuities of linguistic suggestion, especially rhyme ('The Chances of Rhyme', *The Way of a World*). It is providence when the world that he encounters works on the observer by sudden thwartings of expectation: it wakes him by the surprises of appearing vistas, shadows, reflections; it 'unblinds certitude' ('The White Van', *Written on Water*). Its action, indeed, usually seems to be beneficent (it is usually a happy chance), as does that of circumstance. A poem of natural death and rebirth declares: 'The breath of circumstance / is warm' ('One World', *American Scenes*), and although there is still no hint of the good will of the Spirit one nevertheless recalls the warmth in cold, and wonders again just what, in the now 'windless air', such a breath might be.

The latest version of chance occurs in 'The Mirror in the Roadway' (*Notes from New York*), which begins: 'Nature here / is the multiplicity of luck.' Tomlinson is referring to street reflections in a mirror beside a furniture lorry, and writes 'Nature here' rather than 'Nature'; yet the slight, witty, urban incident bids to redefine, I think, the grandiose Nature of Pope or Wordsworth. The physical world is many things in Tomlinson, but 'the multiplicity of luck' (which also, one sees, is good luck) is an accurate way of describing that world as it discloses itself. Strangely enough, it would also seem an apt description of the state of affairs from a Christian point of view – of the impingements of Providence in a world and a life that are fallen.

One of the accompaniments of chance is similitude. Again we return to 'like'; who will write the history of comparison? Similitude has been an explicit concern for Tomlinson since the beginning, vital to the ontological venture of looking and writing, and also painting. According to his most probing thinking, the viewer is not alone in his observing of similitudes, for here too a kind of friendly providence is at work. Through the resemblances of objects one may be 'taken in', or deceived, on one's quest for, say, mushrooms – which, though not occurring in romance, do lead to a magic circle – mistaking for them stones or marks on the ground; yet one is also 'taken in', drawn in, that is, to the perception of affinities, to a more mysterious apprehension of what is there ('Mushrooms', *The Shaft*). A resemblance too, says the poem, is 'real', and 'true' to 'the weft of

seeing', as are the meanings that one reads even though they are 'not there'. In this delicate, understated poem, which ends, 'in the twilight coolness', with the mushrooms becoming 'stepping stones across a grass of water', reality and truth are found in what is not there and yet is there, observed by a seeing that believes, and whose scrupulous weft is perhaps tacitly distinguished from the warp of a vision merely distorted.

Another of chance's strange accompaniments, glanced at in passing, is the reflection. Reflections hold for Tomlinson much the same interest as for Bonnefoy, and he is quite as willing to go along with them. They too, numerous throughout his volumes, are present from the outset, and their first appearance, in 'Venice', the second poem of *The Necklace*, is the most radical. It ends:

> She is about to embark, but pauses.
> Her dress is a veil of sound
> Extended upon silence.
>
> Under the bridge,
> Contained by the reflected arc
> A tunnel of light
> Effaces walls, water, horizon.
>
> Floating upon its own image
> A cortège of boats idles through space.

The reflection is real enough (it may also be the first imprint of Cotman in Tomlinson's work), and the scene is observed in a named city; yet the mind, travelling the reflection and the image, sees and writes out a place that is both physical and mental, that reaches beyond itself, and that floats finally with that cortège. A townscape, at a moment of pause, of 'about to ... ', has become soundless sound, silence, effacement, light, and visionary space; the boats 'in' the sky are material yet weightless. And is it extravagant to think that 'cortège', a French word that has been assimilated into English, acts in itself as the whole poem acts, as a strangeness that is also familiar, a foreignness not outside our experience?

When Tomlinson himself asks what are the appeal and the meaning of reflections, however, as he does in 'Below Tintern' in

The Shaft (his poetry often posing such large questions, and answering them), his conclusion is more complex. The poem begins:

> The river's mirrorings remake a world
> Green to the cliff-tops, hanging
> Wood by wood, towards its counterpart:
> Green gathers there as no green could
> That water did not densen.

Yes: the power of a reflection is not that it reproduces the world but that it 'remakes' it; its bearings, one might say, are Neoplatonic rather than Aristotelian, though it stays close enough to its model to be still a 'mimesis'. A reflection offers entry to the green world, where green attains a greenness beyond what is possible in the nature we see directly, and where 'densen' marvellously suggests a whole world become vivid and compact. A question, however: 'Yet why should mind / So eagerly swim down and through / Such towering dimness?' elicits a response from the poem which is far more ambivalent and, in its ambivalence, surely right. The answer: 'Because that world seems true?' is itself interrogative, and the mere seeming is apparently confirmed by wordplay when the reflections are said to 'lie' beneath the water, and when, with the sudden information that the scene is being looked at from a car which, to close the poem, 'bends by', the underwater sights become 'lost to reflection'. Another pun, of course, and one that Tomlinson probes elsewhere for its suggestion that the mind resembles reflections, and that, by reflecting on objects and also reflecting them, it reconstitutes them in a possible world. So the glimpses, says the poem, are 'true enough'; but just as we are registering a shrug of the shoulders, the other meaning of that phrase too, that the reflected world does have sufficient truth for us, breaks across in the eloquent celebration of 'Those liquid thresholds, that inverted sky / Gripped beneath rockseams by the valley verdure'. A reflection cannot be the world renewed and habitable, but neither is it dismissed as a fancy: the poem, while losing them, salutes the fact that such hints of renewal exist, in a world that is 'counter' to this one yet also a 'part' of it.

(The poem recalls these lines on the river Loddon in Pope's *Windsor-Forest*:

> Oft in her Glass the musing Shepherd spies
> The headlong Mountains and the downward Skies,
> The watry Landskip of the pendant Woods,
> And absent Trees that tremble in the Floods;
> In the clear azure Gleam the Flocks are seen,
> And floating Forests paint the Waves with Green.
>
> (ll. 211–16)

The lines were added after the first writing of the poem, as Pope himself points out in a note. They occur in a context of metamorphosis, as if, to the story of a nymph transformed into the river of her own tears, Pope adds the river's transformation of the scene into a quite novel Arcadia. It is the shepherd who sees the reflection, and he does so perhaps because of a poetic inclination akin to Pope's that sets him 'musing'. I am not sure of the significance of the passage, but I do think that the most fascinating word, given Mallarmé, is 'absent'.)

The religious dimension of the sounding of possibility, of the pursuit of belief, is particularly clear when the encounter is with 'presence', which is also Bonnefoy's word, or indeed with 'mystery'. Presence in the earlier poetry may seem to proclaim the otherness of a physical world in strictly objective terms: doesn't the 'ethic of Cézanne' operate in the poem about him, 'Cézanne at Aix' in *Seeing is Believing*, to indicate the Montagne Sainte-Victoire as neither delicious fruit nor posing sitter but a kind of there-ness of mountain? Indeed it does; yet the mountain, without being numinous – for that is precisely the sort of word that Tomlinson has no use for, and of which he has no need – is not simply there, or rather, its being simply there is itself more than factual. In the final lines:

> There
> In its weathered weight
> Its silence silences, a presence
> Which does not present itself

the very withholding stills one into a kind of awe.

And what of a bowl in the same volume that 'glistens with presence' ('The Ruin')? It glistens with the presence of humans and their objects in a house, with that mutuality of presence which

creates the 'laric world'. But isn't it also presence itself that glistens, or that would do if that world were reanimated, as the bowl opens to the sheer glory of being there? The bowl is also described as 'Gracing the table on which it unfolds itself'. Like Marianne Moore, Tomlinson moves from an aesthetic to a religious meaning of 'grace', but he is his own master in genuinely combining them, and finding in ordinary objects and their reciprocations an extraordinary grace and presence, a light, and a singular unfolding. The idea is essayed more fully in a later poem:

> Two cups,
> a given grace,
> afloat and white
> on the mahogany pool
> of table. They unclench
> the mind, filling it
> with themselves.
> Though common ware,
> these rare reflections,
> coolness of brown
> so strengthens and refines
> the burning of their white,
> you would not wish
> them other than they are –
> you, who are challenged
> and replenished by
> those empty vessels.

('A Given Grace', *American Scenes*)

Two cups on a table have been transfigured, by the combined powers of sight, mind and language, almost to a transcendence: they are afloat, and their whiteness burns. Yet they are still cups, for their renewal is not beyond but within them. That, indeed, is their power – that they change while remaining the same – and 'you would not wish / them other than they are', since in this real vision of them they have already achieved a state of grace. One discovers the same ontological ambition as in Pope: to gild without altering; one also realises that Christianity has been both used and set aside. The grace and the gift occur almost explicitly outside the faith, for

these cups, these vessels, that replenish us with something more than a mere drink, recall the communion cup only to displace it.

Tomlinson sees the 'rare' in the 'common' (a recalling of Wordsworth) earning that almost mystical, almost oxymoronic apprehension, of a filling from what is empty, by the attentiveness, the openness, of his looking; and he sees the mysterious in the factual. He is drawn, indeed, to 'the mystery of fact' ('Maillol', *A Peopled Landscape*), and one needs to remember such a phrase when reading the early poems especially, where the closeness of observation and description, with its often Pope-like delicacy, felicity, luxury ('A salver, stippled at its lip by light', 'as they unlink / The pendants of chandeliers into their winking suds'),[3] trembles accurately on the edge of the mysterious. Even before the appearance of *Seeing is Believing*, moreover, he had reproved the *New Lines* poets for being unaware of 'the continuum outside themselves, of the mystery bodied over against them in the created universe'.[4] Although the word 'created' may be used rather loosely, 'mystery' seems a very deliberate addition to the Buberian expression that he had also adopted earlier, in *The Necklace*, when referring to a house 'bodied over against one' ('Observation of Facts'). The physical universe for Tomlinson, the body of the world, is nothing less than the incarnation of a mystery.[5]

Here is one of his approaches to it, a poem that seems to take its cue from Donald Davie's 'Turnstall Forest':

> We must anticipate the dawn one day,
> Crossing the long field silently to see
> The roe deer feed. Should there be snow this year
> Taking their tracks, searching their colours out,
> The dusk may help us to forestall their doubt
> And drink the quiet of their secrecy
> Before, the first light lengthening, they are gone.
> One day we must anticipate the dawn.
>
> ('The Roe Deer', *The Shaft*)

In a poem whose light and simple touch is of the kind one only reaches at a very great depth, and whose smallness mirrors the small things in the phenomenal world that are large with implication when they are well seen, a silence and secrecy of nocturnal creatures and the wondrousness not of their going but (a beautiful

effect of grammar and syntax) of their being there, gone – in the presence of their absence – occur, one would say, at a limit of the world: not in another world but wherever it is one enters by arriving before the light. The near-repetition of the first line in the last, a musical return with variation, moves from the commonsense practical world in which, if you want to see deer feeding, you have to catch them early, to a kind of ontological wisdom about 'anticipating the dawn'.

The mystery does not lead, of course, to God, and Tomlinson's poetry has an intriguing way of indicating as much. Whereas numerous poets, including some that I have been discussing, are concerned with the invisible, Tomlinson's concern is with the unseen. The invisible implies mysterious reaches behind or beyond the phenomenal world; the unseen surrounds a movement of penetration into the phenomenal ('To see', says 'The Poet as Painter', 'was also to see *within*') with an awareness of the no less mysterious distances that belong to the world itself, where unseen objects in their infinity continue in being and sustain one.

The physical world is a 'mystery bodied'; it is also a threshold, or it contains thresholds. They are the entry to the reflected world (in 'Below Tintern'), and they also offer to usher one into the world's possibility, into its change. In 'Departure', also from *The Shaft*, the point where a brook disappears under a bridge-arch is described as a 'place of perpetual threshold'. As an 'image of perfection' it is poised between 'gloom and gold', and so between the dark and the light, between suffering and gladness, death and life. (For these opposites of experience the earlier poetry too devised alliterative antitheses, such as 'village graves / and village green', 'delight and death').[6] Again the poem may be read in two ways. According to the first, the instant is supreme because it precedes the exhilarating issuing-out of the stream into the daylight, so that in 'reflecting nothing but sun' the waters pass by the threshold and celebrate the everyday real; they overcome the gloom, while nevertheless acknowledging, since they are 'Tasseling and torn', the wound in the world's condition. The other reading, however, would say that 'it is here / That I like best' because the place and moment appeal to 'Thought', the glimpser of possibility, which finds in this 'perpetual' threshold and in the disappearance of the waters the hope, the idea, of one's emerging to a light somehow free of the contradiction. 'Nothing but sun' both salutes the all-conquering sun which

supersedes this moment (this is the volume that contains the poem 'De Sole') and regrets that it is 'nothing but' the sun. A third reading would embrace the other two, and is presumably the poem's wisdom.

There is a theme of the threshold in Tomlinson, where one might not expect it, as there is in Bonnefoy, where one does. And, again as with Bonnefoy, doesn't the world in Tomlinson's poetry give ultimately on to death? In a radio interview of early 1984, having said: 'one does feel at the corners of what one is doing there are openings into a world beyond oneself, into a world of mystery', he went on to describe, as the ground that he shares with religion or the religious instinct, 'this area of the world which is waiting for admission, which is beyond the immediate circle, which is sometimes beyond the human, which is often subtly interwoven with one's sense of death'. Why death? Partly, no doubt, because death is the most mysterious of the mysteries. Is another reason, however, that death is where the world might change beyond itself – is the way to that change – so that one's awareness of the possible involves inevitably, though perhaps only gradually, a sense of death?

Death is a turning from the sun, and since the earth at night makes just that move, with it we enter, according to 'After a Death', 'the whole / Reverted side of things'. The poem is from *The Way In*, a title that deepens at this point, and is actually concerned with a moon just visible in the daytime. It closes a sequence, however, 'Under the Moon's Reign', whose first poem seems to explore that nocturnal reversion, in which each sign is 'transformed' and the heavens are no less than 'transfigured'. The moon reigns in a world of 'lightning' in darkness, of dream, of the closeness yet otherness of animal life, and finally of death: a world remade on the far side of this one. Even here, though, Tomlinson will not allow that the 'miracle', as he agrees to call it, is performed from elsewhere, in excess of human perception and the reality of place; with the result that the 'perfection of the scene' (of the seen) is only 'momentary'. The night-world is flooded with the imagination, but is no more than a glimpse of the death and transfiguration of the daylight world.

According to 'After a Death', moreover, to 'read' the world's reverse would require a special 'sense', which I take to mean that it is the body that must sense a world passed beyond death, but with a sense that we do not possess. Here is part of a later probing:

Mindful of your death, I hear the leap
At life in the *resurrexit* of Bruckner's mass:
For, there, your hope towers whole:
Within a body one cannot see, it climbs
That spaceless space, the ear's
Chief mystery and mind's, that probes to know
What sense might feel, could it outgo
Its own destruction.

('For Miriam', *The Flood*)

'A body one cannot see': the mysterious substance of music is surely being offered as a way of imagining a body that has been through death, its sounds seemingly on the edge of sensing what a resurrected body might sense. Music here is the analogy, in Christian terms, of a 'spiritual body', and is, at least in that comma-enclosed 'there', a genuine 'hope' of resurrection. In this startling passage, the Rilkean equation to which Tomlinson has turned many times, 'song is being', is reinterpreted to suggest that music reaches for being through and beyond the dissolution of the body, by being itself an indissoluble body. Not surprisingly, in that light, music becomes the 'chief' mystery of the mind as well as of the ear. The poem, to be sure, moves on, but it has paused on that thought.

If, as a way of reading Tomlinson, this sounds improbable, consider an even more recent poem, 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' in *Notes from New York*. It begins:

To cross a ferry that is no longer there,
The eye must pilot you to the farther shore:
It travels the distance instantaneously
And time also: the stakes that you can see
Raggedly jettying into nothingness ...

Again like Bonnefoy, Tomlinson, one realises, has his ferryman. And the Charon to pilot one to that farther shore, to the *ulterior ripa* of death, is, of all things, the organ most prominent in his poetry, the eye itself. The mere looking across to the opposite bank of a river where there used to be a ferry has been transfigured into a journey of the mind, via another of the senses, into death. The crossing has been demythologised, and placed in the real New York of Whitman,

but the seeing eye has also become visionary. (Part of what is involved here is a right use of the body. 'The Poet as Painter' declares: 'by trusting to sensation, we enter being'.) As a poem about the eye's mysterious traffic with death, 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' sends back intimations of meaning to the earlier poems about seeing, and persuades one that 'mystical', though certainly unexpected, might not be too inaccurate a description of Tomlinson's writing, as indeed of his graphics.

There would be many things to say of Tomlinson's graphics: they seem to me among the most powerful visual images recently produced in England, though, like the radically innovative works of Cotman which are among the major influences on them, they are largely ignored.[7] As seeings and believings, they are arguably the quintessence of his poetry. Their mysteriousness clearly borders the mystical (a comment he has made on a critical moment in his struggling with paint: 'I saw black become dazzling', takes one to the famous oxymoron in Vaughan's 'The Night': a 'deep, but dazzling darkness'); while a description, also in 'The Poet as Painter', of his decalcomania-collage 'The Sleep of Animals' leads vertiginously to death, and seemingly to a depth of all his graphic work: 'two skulls are filled by a dream of the landscapes the bird and animal presences have been moving through. The dream articulates the darkness. I try to suggest a whole world in each head. There is the hint that this sleep is, perhaps, death in which both the head and nature are now one.' Death is where the mind and the mystery bodied over against one enter each other through a process of visionary change.

* * *

Tomlinson's art, his mysticism (as it were) of the real, is 'a sort of religion', though at a deliberate distance from Christianity. Another implication of 'seeing is believing' is, after all, that what constitutes belief is not faith in God but a certain quality of sight; and he has presented himself, with an unusual absence of reticence and in a context charged with human loss and theological drama ('For Miriam'), as 'I/A pagan'. Not Christian, his poetry is not secular either.

Only if one recognises this can one learn the lesson of his precision, his scrupulousness. He draws back from transcendence (perhaps through hesitation, suspicion, rather than rejection), and

from a transformation of the world, for the sake of discovering the world as a kind of permanent possibility of becoming, a continuous creation – but not through fear of exceeding the verifiable: why should an opposite bank, after all, be 'the farther shore'? He probes, with intense alertness and honesty to experience, and where he does not know, he does not conclude. A Christian might argue that it is easier to write convincingly about, for instance, being sustained by the 'giant palm' of nature ('The Hill', *American Scenes*) than by the 'everlasting arms' of God; he might want to reverse Tomlinson's dictum another way, and claim that believing is seeing, since to see fully one must first believe. Yet Tomlinson's exigence remains, as an invitation, not to stick to the facts but to reverence the real.

Coventry Patmore asserted, moreover: 'All realities will sing, nothing else will', and it is to the singing of the real, and indeed of fact, that Tomlinson returns one. When Ruskin writes in *Modern Painters*, quaintly it may now seem, of the 'truth of clouds', the 'truth of vegetation'; when Coleridge notes that the 'trout leaping in the sunshine spreads on the bottom of the river concentric circles of light';[8] when Tomlinson himself remarks, in the 'Ode to Arnold Schoenberg' (*A Peopled Landscape*), that as the wind ruffles the water beneath a willow the 'swayed mirror / half-dissolves / and the reflection / yields to reflected light', one is persuaded how much there is to notice in the world, how capable of delighting even bare notations are, when they have their own fineness, and how just is a certain realism; and one is persuaded that a clear sighting of what is there, of what occurs, can be (can be) a form of worship. Tomlinson's poetry is a renewal both in its mystery and in its clarity; its vision is a clairvoyance – neither an inert looking nor a *voyance* but a sight that is a quite overwhelming insight.

11

Geoffrey Hill's Imitations

Geoffrey Hill's first book title, *For the Unfallen*, is already an interesting piece of writing. By referring one to 'For the Fallen', the well loved Great War elegy of Laurence Binyon, and so to any number of other poems in the genre, it delves the reader into poetry's many-layered process of writing and re-writing, while keeping its distance. More specifically, Binyon's response to the war, his muffling of pain, evil, death in undemanding versions of patriotism, art and transcendence, is exactly what Hill's poetry works against, the nexus of simple affirmations of which he continually takes the measure.

The title also involves wordplay. As quoted from the concluding poem it backhandedly dedicates the book to those who fail to recognise that they are fallen more deeply, and implicated in a fallen world.

All his book-titles, in fact, including that chosen for the American collective edition, and many of the titles of his poems, are taken from the works, or liturgies, of others. They display the central and varied presence in his poetry of imitation, a form of inspiration, whose graph even rises from volume to volume. His writings imply previous writings; wordplay frequently accompanies this poem-play.

The poems he chooses to approach are characteristically positives from which, in the act of imitation, he withdraws. The second and final sonnets of 'Lachrimae' (*Tenebrae*) are versions of Quevedo and Lope de Vega which demur about art and about religious experience; they are also, I believe, two of his finest poems, and at the heart of his work. 'Lachrimae' as a whole derives, as he indicates, from other works: from an anonymous sonnet of the Spanish Renaissance, 'A Cristo crucificado', whose strategy of addressing Christ on the cross governs the series and whose details recur; and from Dowland's *Lachrimae*, a sequence of intricately interwoven pavans of the English Renaissance, each beginning with the same swelling and falling motif figurative of tears, which inspire an

equally intricate series of sonnets, three of them opening with the phrase 'Crucified Lord', which has a similar rhythm to Dowland's and is likewise figurative, this time of the focal paradox of Christianity. 'Lachrimae' changes its material, however, using it as a point, precisely, of departure, from certainties which Hill finds difficult to recover, and which he is suspicious of recovering, and of wanting to recover. Whereas Dowland moves ascensionally from 'Lachrimae Antiquae' to 'Lachrimae Verae', Hill, beginning with 'Lachrimae Verae', redefines 'true' in terms of his own tough-minded truth-telling, via powerfully affirmed negatives: 'I cannot turn aside from what I do;/you cannot turn away from what I am./You do not dwell in me nor I in you'; and although he closes with 'Lachrimae Amantis', 'lover' too, as we shall see, is considerably disturbed.

The moments of deepest change are the two versions. The 'free translation' of Lope shifts the confession and longing of the original[1] into a self-abrasive, desirous refusal of the sequence's crucified Lord. Take the beginning:

> What is there in my heart that you should sue
> so fiercely for its love? What kind of care
> brings you as though a stranger to my door
> through the long night and in the icy dew
>
> seeking the heart that will not harbour you,
> that keeps itself religiously secure?

There is still the echo, as in Lope, of the Old Testament cry, 'What is man, that thou art mindful of him?' (less in the classic instance of Psalm 8 than in the seventh chapter of *Job*, which also asks why God 'sets his heart' on man and tries him 'every moment'), and of Christ's words in Revelation 3:20, 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock', along with their context in the letter to the 'lukewarm' Laodiceans. One becomes aware also, however, of the slow, intent, wresting of Lope's poem in a translation deliberately 'wrong'. An address to 'my Jesus', with its assuredness, through any failure, of belonging, is replaced by one to an unnamed lord, an address more eloquent perhaps, and (for a Christian, I think) more moving, the vividness of the emotion being achieved in small details for the ear and the mouth, especially those hard c's in 'What kind of care ...', which catch in the throat and impede utterance. Whereas the

speaker in Lope, moreover, continues to invoke Jesus until the end, Hill's tercets turn aside, to distance the lord, in the last word of the poem, as 'him'. The final move is a change of temporal perspective. The lament in the Spanish sonnet is that the speaker has so often deferred opening the house of his soul to Jesus, through the past, while Hill's poem exists in a present of continuing rejection, where the heart 'will not' – or wills not to – harbour the lord, whose wounds in a later line 'must' bleed anew, and where there is no sign that the 'tomorrow' of the conclusion: '"tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him"', will ever arrive. There is even another 'mistranslation', in line 7:

> At this dark solstice filled with frost and fire,

of a moment in the midwinter spring passage of Eliot's 'Little Gidding': 'When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire'; the change hints at the absence of any spiritual spring from the darkness where Hill's poem is situated.

The self-analysis and self-censure have also become more severe, and more modern. In the exploration of pseudo-religious emotion in the line, 'bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse', one notes by the way a critique of art, which favours such states, and specifically, Dowland still being present, of the 'tones' of music; while '*religiously* secure' is truly harsh. The poem's achievement is surely the meshing of recognition and refusal, self-knowledge that is both hurt and clenched, complexities of honesty requiring, as Eliot wrote of Blake, great technical accomplishment. It is, in its way, a *marturia*, a witness to the truth, not of God but of our unwillingness for God.

The strength of the poem is owing partly to its being the last of a sequence, the whole of which it gathers and reappraises. A feature of Hill's use of other writers' materials is that by placing them in his work he creates new meanings within and around them. The imitation of Quevedo, moved to the second place in the sequence from the fifth which it occupied initially, intensifies the opening poem's glance at the shocking ambiguity of art, specified in the crucifix: 'This is your body twisted by our skill', and maybe in the poem itself: 'This'. For if the Lope version is a major engagement with the possibly delusive perplexities of religion, the Quevedo version is a major engagement with the certainly delusive ease of art. Quevedo's original, 'Retrato de Lisi que traía en una sortija',

'Portrait of Lisi which he carried in a ring',[2] seemingly climaxes for a voicing of the speaker's baffled love and bitter realisation of the girl's inhumanity; it focuses, however, on a fine conceit, which sees the beautiful girl transformed into the art-work of a miniature as enclosing in that tiny compass all the splendours of the day and of the starry heavens, the gems of the east, the dramas of weather, and even as constituting, concealed from the real sky and the usual sunrise, a new light and a better birth. Hill's imitation gags on that late-Renaissance exuberance:

> Splendour of life so splendidly contained,
> brilliance made bearable. It is the east
> light's embodiment, fit to be caressed,
> the god Amor with his eyes of diamond,
>
> celestial worldliness on which has dawned
> intelligence of angels, Midas' feast,
> the stony hunger of the dispossessed
> locked into Eden by their own demand.
>
> Self-love, the slavish master of this trade,
> conquistador of fashion and remark,
> models new heavens in his masquerade,
>
> its images intense with starry work,
> until he tires and all that he has made
> vanishes in the chaos of the dark.

By a surprising and suggestive move, he filters the 'conceit' of the Incarnation (a man who is God, a creature the Creator) into Quevedo's conceit about art, concentrating two aspects of that divine leap into the human in the wordplay of 'bearable'; and in a language at once lavish and sardonic explores (I take it) responses to incarnation and to the work of art when both have become idolatrous. As to the latter, Hill's is a relentless decrial and a stricken one, where poetry – 'this trade' – is then the servant of self-love, while the 'new heavens' which it produces have as their end fashion and remark and as their conclusion the nothingness of disillusion and death. The art-work, a creation comparable to God's in the Romantic view, returns to the chaos and dark from which, according to Genesis, creation proceeds.

Much of the poem's power is in its emphatic and accumulative naming, which one 'makes prose again' only with hesitation, and about which one may well be mistaken. There is re-creative art, seemingly, as a 'celestial worldliness' (an oxymoron whose logic is repeated but also demonised in 'slavish master'), hopefully a truly earthed vision of the world made new but more likely a desire for a new world fed by merely worldly lusts; and re-creative imagination as the 'intelligence of angels', either an authentic higher percipience or just the possibly empty angelism of so many poets since Rimbaud. There is the banquet of art as 'Midas' feast' (a hint from another Quevedo poem),[3] where the hunger for a golden world turns poeticised reality into a stone, querying Yeats and preparing music as 'Medusa' in the chilling final poem of the volume (an extraordinary, pared anti-ode to St Cecilia, which only someone passionate about music and poetry could be moved to write). There is submission to the dispossessing art-work as being 'locked into Eden' (Quevedo calls the portrait a 'prison'), an ironic doom for a race, according to Genesis, locked out of it; and the work of the artist as 'starry' because it fashions and concentrates a new and heavenly brilliance, but also because its vision is starry-eyed, and perhaps the artist himself wants to be a star.

The reference in the new title which Hill has provided to *The Masque of Blackness* of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones extends the idolatry to empire (one better appreciates 'conquistador'), and specifically the British Empire which comes under scrutiny later in the book. Among the delusions catered for in the masque, in which the daughters of Niger come to Britain to lose their blackness in that superior resplendence, are that Britannia is a 'world divided from the world' and the 'diamond' in the world's 'ring' (the imagery is also Quevedo's), and that the light of the British monarch is 'sciential' and 'past mere nature'. Hill parallels those terms, opening his poem's critique to this further, and to all, presumptions of transcendence.

It is a formidable poem, more than merely 'challenging'. It has to be lived through, by writers and readers concerned in any way with poetry as re-creative. It is a scourging of motive, and scores-through any reaching for new heavens, or indeed a new earth, any celebration of the value and potency of art, which does not proceed from whatever the opposite is of self-love – love, perhaps. And one's sense of its truth is not diminished but increased by the realisation of its own ambiguity: that this sonnet too is a splendid

container; that, to quote the terms of the fifth poem, this 'self-wounding' has its own 'joys'.

* * *

Other imitations approach transcendence in different terms. *Mercian Hymns* are the most abrupt about it. Thematically, they declare an ironic distance from the Mercian Hymns of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, which are praisings of 'Dryhten', the Lord. Though still hymns, they fail to address themselves to God: they cause Offa, the 'overlord' whom they both praise and dispraise, to appropriate the hymns to himself – 'sing it again', he answers antiphonally in hymn I – and so explore tyrannical selfhood, the 'kempt and jutting' ego of Offa (XIII) as, indeed, of Hill himself and of the reader; and they choose to celebrate such matters as 'Gasholders, russet among fields' (VII), 'the meadow scabbed with cow-dung' (XXII), 'lime-splodges and phlegm' (XXIII). Nor does the volume avoid transcendence merely because it deals with a mundane period of our history: hymn XXIII turns to the 're-entry of transcendence into this sublunary world' in the later Middle Ages, yet silently opposes, to the 'treacherous' thread of embroidery which 'riddled' that mystery (a pun), the 'reliable' light of oil-lamps, shining not on 'masterworks' but on munching workers.

In 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' (*Tenebrae*), transcendence and its loss are viewed in terms of national nostalgia, pain for the return home. The sequence, Hill's most searching work on the 'condition of England', includes as its precisely placed second poem an imitation of another Spanish sonnet, by Lope de Vega's contemporary, Argensola. The original[4] already concerns wasted time and the loss of the object of desire, and concludes descriptions of the hardening of the natural world in autumn with the sight of a 'delaying' lover (his name is Fabius) weeping with shame at his mistress's threshold. The real and emblematic countryside is named as northern Spanish, and Hill seems to have lighted on this hint for the making of a poem not only set in northern England but with England as its subject. The adversity of the late season becomes the autumn of our discontent, and when the brief sun is gone we are said, according to a notion added to the original, to live 'like gleaners of its vestiges', picking, one supposes, at what remains of Empire and of

other national splendours. The ending transforms and complicates Argensola's:

> Why does the air grow cold
>
> in the region of mirrors? And who is this clown
> doffing his mask at the masked threshold
> to selfless raptures that are all his own?

These are not rhetorical questions, and I am none too sure of the answers. It appears that, as well as the lover who, maskless, knows his failure and sinks into the self-regard of ostensibly outward-looking repining; and as well as the poet, no longer modelling new heavens in his masquerade but caught in an equally self-loving contemplation of an unattainable poetic kingdom; there is the Englishman – the Englishman as lover-poet – cold in a country suspended in mirror-images of itself but glowing with the self-indulgent raptures of nostalgia.

Hill has also added a title: 'Damon's Lament for his Clorinda, Yorkshire 1654', which doubtless refers one to another poem, Marvell's 'Clorinda and Damon', where the amorous advances of a shepherdess are met by a shepherd's chaste resolve to redeem the natural objects of pastoral into tropes of Christian piety (flocks into lost sheep, fountains into baptismal waters, etc.). For Damon to lament the shepherdess suggests that, to his witty and successful transfiguration, he now prefers Arcadia as the emblem of unfulfilled longing. By setting the poem in 1654, when Marvell had in fact left Yorkshire and Nun Appleton – which may imply, more simply, that by a similar move Damon has forfeited Clorinda – Hill also introduces another nostalgia, for the lost country house.

Argensola's theme of the lover lamenting his mistress has been made extraordinarily more dense and extensive. The reading of Hill's imitation as a poem about historical England is prompted by the title of the sequence, but also by the previous poem, 'Quaint Mazes', whose richer nostalgia and softer irony it serves to chill. 'Quaint Mazes' layers its nostalgias, beginning:

> And, after all, it is to them we return.
> Their triumph is to rise and be our hosts:
> lords of unquiet or of quiet sojourn,
> those muddy-hued and midge-tormented ghosts.

'They' are the Pugin, Coleridge and Disraeli of the title and epigraphs, intent on the revival of an older England of transcendence. They are also the quaint mazes of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, the Renaissance turf mazes transported to fairy-land, which add a Shakespearian to a nineteenth-century regret since Titania describes them as become 'undistinguishable' through 'lack of tread' (II i 99–100). They are also the world of Shakespeare himself, and, as the poem advances, the Catholic religion banished in his time, a still older religion of 'sacred well' and 'hidden shrine', the 'trysts' and 'quests' of romance, the country house of the centuries intervening between Shakespeare and Coleridge, the English wood slowly ravaged. And to those losses, and our loss of the masters of those losses, is added regret for a world perfectly named, a vision of 'Linnaean pentecosts' which, as the Spirit-wind of The Acts of the Apostles 2:2–4 makes the lilac-bush 'blustery' and its tongues of fire cause fountains to 'burn', illuminate objects with their 'pronged light', with the binomial classification, that is, in that most sustained of modern revivals of Adam's naming of the beasts.

It is a marvellous act of recovery, of pious memory; a definitive performance of what the poem calls 'religion of the heart', the religion of warm imaginative allegiances, to charged writings, places and moments of the past, of reverent pilgrimages in part through the mind, which a literary education fosters, or used to foster. Since Hill's concern, however, is not to indulge in nostalgia but, as he said in an interview with John Haffenden, to draw its graph,[5] the poem is also touched with doubt. These may indeed be mazes, and their quaintness, fine and delicate in Shakespeare's use of the word, may also be somewhat picturesque. These healing places and sacramental spots can bind the heart to 'old hymns of servitude', a word Hill opposes, in his essay on T. H. Green in *The Lords of Limit*, to its acceptable form, 'fealty'. There is even a hint in the fourth line's oblique recall of the ending of 'Byzantium': 'That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea', that Hill's ghosts may not be entirely distinct from Yeats's shade, and that his Midsummer-Night's dream may be ultimately kin to Yeats's All Souls' nightmare of desperate, manic transcendence. The following poem, the imitation, then suggests the delusion which can be involved in that nostalgia, that return to 'Clorinda'. And although the commemoration of inheritance continues through the sequence, the suggestion is still to be heeded in the final sonnet, where an image of

transcendence from the past is allowed to radiate triumphantly at the moment it is most aggressed:

> Touched by the cry of the iconoclast,
> how the rose-window blossoms with the sun!

The sonnet begins, 'So to celebrate that kingdom', and such a kingdom appears in various guises in Hill's poetry, as the object of a celebratory but also sceptical search. It is many things, but essentially, according to an expression of Christopher Devlin's that Hill quotes to Haffenden, 'the lost kingdom of innocence and original justice', to which, he adds, 'every fine and moving poem bears witness'. Hill's work really is for the fallen: it acknowledges both the power and the powerlessness of poetry, that it can evoke Eden but may not usher one into it, being an alluring sign of exile. The awareness of that loss is not, of course, a passivity. It is the motive for modelling a new, guilt-acknowledging justice; for grappling the possibility of knowing God nevertheless, and of discovering a significant world through art; and also for exploring a new transcendence of locality. We shall observe the latter in *Mercian Hymns*; there are also two engagements, in 'Fantasia on "Horbury"' in *King Log* and 'Terribilis est Locus Iste' in *Tenebrae*, with Genesis 28, where Jacob dreams of angels ascending and descending a ladder between heaven and earth, and is convinced on waking that the place where he finds himself is 'dreadful', the house of God and the gate of heaven. They are fascinated, resistant approaches, from complex distances, to one of the cardinal passages in scripture for linking this world to another.

Isn't it also true, in one light, that all 'fine and moving' poems, whatever their suspicion, or whatever their orientation towards the future, eventually bid to become the lost kingdom, themselves the objects of nostalgia, Edens of imaginative ease, of verbal fulfilment? Here is another significance of Hill's imitations: they 'return' to those places of hazardous repletion, and disturb them.

* * *

Nevertheless, one needs to underline the celebration of both the experiences and the poetries which he makes available. Although the originals are sometimes present as the poems he is *not* writing, another and obvious point to be made about his imitation is that he

praises certain poems by other writers which he is happy to have come upon, by using them as means to engender poems of his own. He makes them part of the process of his own writing, involving them in the transformation which is arguably the practice of every poem. Like many poets, and especially like Lowell, whose *Imitations* he reviewed with a practitioner's care,[6] and whose influence on him has, of course, been extensive and diverse, he creates partly by scrutinising works already there in the world of literature, as he makes wordplay by scrutinising words already there in the world of language.

'The Pentecost Castle' (*Tenebrae*) arranges, into a new and stanzaically uniform sequence, a number of Spanish poems and songs of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries concerned, like the *Song of Songs* which lies behind them, with the relations of sexual and divine love, which it sometimes couples in the Renaissance orgasmic connotation of 'to die'. (Hill again discovered the poems in *The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse*: one of the wider effects of his imitations is to open English poetry to the poetry of Counter-Reformation Spain.) Although it too disturbs its sources, Hill has also drawn on them to produce a kind of ballad poetry that is hardly recognisable as having existed in English before. The puzzling title may be announcing this: while it points presumably to St Teresa of Avila's 'interior castle' of the soul and to the uniting of the disciples with God and with each other at Pentecost, it also suggests the gift of tongues at work in translation and granting new utterance: Pentecost Castle replacing Babel Tower. The poems are therefore both Hill's and not Hill's, almost anonymous, hauntingly impersonal; a novel means, indeed, of procuring impersonality. And one still presumes his commitment to them. The engagement with experiences away from his own provides focus, so that, while miming the various voices, the actors and commentators of the drama, he is telling things as he understands them to be.

Mercian Hymns were also generated formally by the works they imitate – unless, that is, they simply came that way. Rather than merely 'prose poems' they are an original form, 'versets of rhythmical prose', as Hill himself has called them (again in conversation with Haffenden), with a 'pitched and tuned chant', the versets even occasionally interrupting the syntax. They could have been suggested by an acknowledged precedent, the 'Te

Deum', whose rhythmical prose lines are divided into sections; they also recall Sweet's 'Mercian Hymns', prose versions of biblical poems which likewise imply both prose and poetry, the sense of poetry in reading them being enhanced by one's memory of them as verses in the Bible and especially, where appropriate, in the Missal or Prayer Book. Hill's hymns are then provided with a further visual formality, the ranging of the start of each verset to the left of the subsequent line, which alludes to one of the ways of printing sonnets.

The hymns are also, in their way, translations. A particularity of Sweet's hymns is that they are not free-standing but are written as an interlinear gloss on canticles from the Vulgate; the Anglo-Saxon neither merely implies the Latin nor faces it, but combines with it page by page. Hill similarly interlineates our world with Offa's, the two lines, of Mercian and modern, sometimes merging entirely, so that one can read through 'Their windshields dripped butterflies' to 'Their shields dripped blood' (hymn XXI). One thinks of Eliot ('The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne', etc.), but more of David Jones, since Hill is clearly writing for continuity, almost in the manner of the Mercian translator, or crib-writer, who matched the Latin word for word.

Indeed, *Mercian Hymns* also resemble their 'source' in being bilingual, an interlacing of Latin and Anglo-Saxon. The dual thread of text in Sweet's hymns can be very moving, since it is precisely that doubling which has come to constitute our own language: English is present on a ninth-century manuscript as a glint in the eye of history. We are now all bilingual, as are all our writings. Hill, however, draws attention to the two strands, sometimes composing a 'Latin' of singular eloquence ('Itinerant through numerous domains, of his lord's retinue', XXIV), more often a more mysterious 'Anglo-Saxon' ('They clove to the hoard', XII), highlighted in vocabulary ('burh', XX, 'wergild', V), in agglutinations ('blue-glassed storm-lantern', XXII, 'classroom-floorboards', VII), or in metre ('with branches and half-bricks, he battered a ditchful; then sidled away from the stillness and silence', VII). And he indicates the presence of this language-play, this peering back into the ill-documented and foreign gloom, by setting down what looks like unusually powerful translationese: 'forewarned I have thwarted their imminent devices' (VIII); by perpetrating a seeming mis-translation or scribal error: 'unattainable toys' for unattainable joys (VI);

by conjuring a whole poem, the second, from various, punning, attempts to translate the one word 'Offa'.

And are these 'Mercian' hymns only because Mercia is their territory or as Sweet's, because they are written in 'Mercian'? – not the known Anglo-Saxon variant but a fresh language elaborated for the purpose. It is possible to emphasise Hill's mistrust of language and to miss his undertaking to renew it. The renewal here is achieved partly through various forms of the wordplay for which he is well known, particularly rife in this volume and at one point obliquely discussed. Of men who came to caulk water-pipes it is said in hymn XII, through a terse apostrophe: 'They are scattered to your collations, moldywarp'. 'Moldywarp' is an Old English and now dialectal word for mole; it is also, less the 'm', an anagram of 'wordplay' – and thereby an example of wordplay into the bargain. This may be a merely ingenious reading, yet Hill has used a spelling of 'moldwarp' that needs to be searched for among the many spellings listed in the *OED*, and the context supports it. Since 'collations' is another equivoque, both a light repast and a bringing together, as the men are scattered into the soil to feed moles so sounds and meanings are dispersed then gathered in wordplay. As the moldywarp 'throws the earth', moreover, in keeping with its etymology, so wordplay heaves the loam of language, disturbing and re-forming it. The two loams are even assimilated: when the opening verset states that the men's spades 'clove to the hoard' it also evokes the Anglo-Saxon word-hoard which is equally being dug for; and the fact that they 'grafted' through the soil means that writing is in question too, since 'graft' derives from the Greek word for stylus. In a poem which delves through the soil of England, in terms of workman, gardener, archaeologist, literary historian, writer, a complex wordplay where anagram collaborates with etymology (Hill is a poet who knows his Onions) is enacted and referred to, in a context which relates language profoundly, to the earth and to a process of death and recovery.

Wordplay is one of the ways in which the poetry thinks. It binds the world in its relations, so that a wasps' nest 'ensconced' in a hedge-bank becomes quite appropriately a wrapped 'head' (XV). It mediates between Offa's time and ours, the attendants at Offa's funeral (XXVII) including 'car-dealers' and 'house-carls'. (A secondary pun occurs when 'a *shuffle* of house-carls' sends the mind back to the possibility of 'card-dealers'; at which point memory may travel to 'Verses on the Death of Dr Swift', a poem Hill discusses in

his essay on Swift in *The Lords of Limit*, where with similar punning heartlessness the tender 'Hearts' of the Dean's female friends lament his death while comfortably calling the suits in quadrille.) It superimposes apparently alien areas of experience, saying of children who sport with plunder, fire and destruction in a garden echoing with Anglo-Saxon war and burial rites, that they 'play havoc' (XIX). It snarls varieties and discrepancies of human experience inextricably in the space of a few words, entering the meditation in hymn XVI on courtesy and empire, art and slaughter, sacrifice and murderous intent, to call the Frankish sword presented to Offa a 'two-edged' gift and to locate the craftsman's triumph in its 'crux'. One recalls the line about love in the second of the 'Annunciations' in *King Log*: 'Forever being pledged to be redeemed', which compromises vows and purification with the routines of pawnbroking. (Has it been remarked that Hill makes many of his phrases unsayable?) By closing with wordplay, even to employing, as Christopher Ricks has shown, double-takes of deliberately shocking tastelessness,[7] Hill grasps the potentially most frivolous manoeuvre of the fallen word for a teeming creativity at once ludic and grave.

The remaking of English goes further, to the evolving of a language ours and yet not quite ours, for a world similarly elusive. Hill's 'Mercian' re-names things, as 'village-lintels' (III). It digs, like a mole, for strange objects in the earth, 'Ramparts of compost', for instance, 'pioneered by red-helmeted worms' (XV), for 'telluric cultures' (there is play on both words) enriched with 'shards, corms, nodules, the sunk solids of gravity' (XII). It cleaves to numerous linguistic roots, bringing to the surface, with a few words such as 'They ransacked epiphanies, vertebrae ... ' (XII), Old Norse, Greek, Latin. It amasses an extreme physicality which includes nevertheless a kind of mentality: 'Coagulations of frogs: once, with branches and half-bricks, he battered a ditchful' (VII), where strictly the boy battered not the frogs but 'a ditchful' (and where bricks naturally 'batter' through the prompting of 'brickbat'). And what kind of place is described in hymn XIX, a 'kitchen-garden riddled with toy-shards, with splinters of habitation'? This garden, which is no paradise in its exposal of detritus and death, seems nevertheless the glimpse of a newly-named earth, both familiar and unfamiliar. Isn't this, in fact, the book's 'transcendence'? In its gardens and its 'numinous but actual landscapes' (William Cookson),[8] it delves into the material, the worldly, the earthy, as the site of aspiration, from

which, according to a vertiginous expression of hymn V, to worm one's way heavenward.

* * *

Hill's imitations affect one mainly, however, with a sense of distance. 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz', a special case since it purports to be a version of an (apocryphal) Spanish poet's *cancionero*, is particularly suggestive. It concludes a volume, *King Log*, several of whose poems rework actual originals from a distance which is polemical, and it ministers distance of a different kind to the reader as it opens and closes: by the shiver back and forth between 'Sebastian Arrurruz: 1868–1922', which places him as, above all else, dead, and the first line of the first poem, with its equally careful counting of time: 'Ten years without you ... '; and by the consigning of Arrurruz's 'now' in the final words of the sequence, 'Of now-almost-meaningless despair', way into the past. For distance is one of its concerns. The feigning of Arrurruz allows the writing of the poems; his name indicates the nature of that writing. If he is a St Sebastian pierced by the arrows of his wife's leaving him, he also possesses arrowroot, the translation of 'arrurruz', which is the herb that absorbs arrow poison. (He is to be healed, interestingly, by an unstated interlingual pun, 'arrowroot' having been derived from the Aruak *aru-aru* – heard as the root which cures from arrows – by some seventeenth-century paronomastic.) The question, however, is whether the antidote: language, memory, poetry, works with propriety. Its function will be, not to dispel pain but to establish 'true sequences' of pain, creating value in both the truth recovered and the 'bleak skill' of the writing which recovers it. Yet Arrurruz is continually aware that language and memory move to betray feelings:

> Oh my dear one, I shall grieve for you
> For the rest of my life with slightly
> Varying cadence, oh my dear one

(the last phrase supplying one of the varying cadences); that in imagination he and his wife become each time 'more stylized more lovingly / Detailed' ('lovingly' being as unsparing as the 'religiously' of 'Lachrimae Amantis'). The antidote does succeed, but also discloses a slippery inner distance from feeling and a distance of words from feelings.

Hence the idea of imitation, which adds a further distance since the feelings and the approach to feelings in words are those of someone else, who moreover never existed. And hence the idea of translation. Although Hill has stated that he was inspired to create an imaginary poet mainly by Machado's Juan de Mairena and Abel Martín, Spanish fictions of a Spanish writer, he actually altered the device by inventing not a native but a foreign poet. The original work is doubly unattainable: it doesn't exist, and within the pretence of the writing we meet only a version of it, and an approximate version at that, where 'the finer nuances' (his quip to Haffenden) 'have been lost'. One is conscious that Hill is involved in the common humanity enacted in the poems, yet the activity of reading them differs from reading, say, the statements of a novelist's character, or even the *Cancionero* of Abel Martín. One attends closely to a process of translation operating, as it were, on other, unreachable words, to a gap being bridged and not bridged. As a second 'skill' comes into play, that of the translator, the poems themselves change and withdraw. The process is foregrounded, moreover, and a further remove suggested, when in the seventh poem, 'From the Latin', an unnamed Latin writer is rendered (so to speak) by Arrurruz, whose rendering is rendered by Hill: somewhere is an exact sensuality, wry knowingness about relationship and social occasion, but where, and whose?

The 'Songbook' follows a group of poems beginning, 'Do words make up the majesty / Of man ... ?', an overt Empsonian ambiguity where words may either constitute or fake our majesty, and where the tense hesitation is also carried in the broken pentameter and the combination of prosodic and lexical grandeur and vulnerability in the held-over 'Of man'. The Songbook continues the practice of that question, in terms of the adequacy, the appropriateness, of language to experience, from the different perspectives of Arrurruz and Hill. Dying in the Modernist year of 1922, Arrurruz writes an earlier poetry intent on the expression of personal feeling (though not without indirection, since a reference to Mount Ararat in his wife's part of the world implicitly evokes the Ark, which the species entered 'two and two'). Hill, on the other hand, the heir of Modernism, uses the foreign and apocryphal Arrurruz to compose a sequence where feeling is approached through a complexity of screens. They piece together their identical yet different 'fragments' on either side of the decisive shoring of fragments in *The Waste Land*.

Of course, the distance is not merely negative: its acknowledgement is part of the honesty of Hill's poetry (honesty, not sincerity), and it makes the achievement of Arrurruz's poems – which are songs, and which do form a genuine sequence, ordered by something other than mere date of composition – all the more striking, a feat of writing and of character. The close references in the two Armenian poems to Mandelstam's *Journey to Armenia* ('ripe glandular' blooms being an actual quote from Clarence Brown's translation) references that Arrurruz could not have made and that Hill has bestowed on him – even align the forgotten fictitious poet with one of the great literary martyrs. Out of his particular *misère*, he and Hill have wrung, after all, a new kind of utterance.

That combination of distance and achievement is something to be found quite near the centre of Hill's writing. His is a poetry struck with the difficulty of closing with experience, especially religious experience, and nerved against the ease of pretence. It is a poetry almost of not experiencing, or rather, it is rich with the complex experiencing of the truth of that exclusion. It is also dubious concerning the transcendence of language, and informed about the declension of words themselves from the 'lost kingdom'. Its achievement is to enact experience paradoxically dense, layered, and new, and to create a language, paradoxically, transfigured.

Notes

CHAPTER 1: WRITING PARADISE LOST

1. All quotations of *Paradise Lost* are from Milton, *Poetical Works*, edited by Douglas Bush (London, 1966).
2. Ibid., p. xxvii, quoted from the second book of *The Reason of Church Government*.
3. 'Syntax and Music in *Paradise Lost*', in *The Living Milton*, edited by Frank Kermode (London, 1960) p. 73.
4. T. S. Dorsch's translation, in the Penguin *Classical Literary Criticism* (Harmondsworth, 1965) p. 43.

CHAPTER 2: LA FONTAINE AND THE SUBVERSION OF POETRY

1. *La Fontaine: Fables* (London, 1960) pp. 42–3.

CHAPTER 3: A MEANING FOR MOCK-HEROIC

1. *The Rape of the Lock*, I 19. Quotations from Pope use the Twickenham edition throughout, vol. 2, *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems*, edited by Geoffrey Tillotson, 3rd edn (London and New Haven, Conn., 1962). I have used Tillotson's notes freely.
2. Boileau criticises Ménage in his *Satire II* for transposing the noun and the verb (l. 45), and Chapelain in *Satire IV* for separating terms (l. 99), from opposition, presumably, not to the devices but to their misuse, to their being applied 'cent fois' and 'sans raison', a hundred times and to no purpose.
3. Both the *Traité du Sublime* and Cantos I to IV of *Le Lutrin* appeared for the first time in the *Oeuvres diverses* of 1674. The translation was begun before 1672, and in that year a reading was given of passages from the poem.
4. In the Loeb translation one finds: 'Just as in music what we call ornament enhances the beauty of the main theme, so periphrasis often chimes in with the literal expression of our meaning and gives it a far richer note', and, 'he has taken the literal expression and made it musical, lapping it, as it were, in the tuneful harmonies of his periphrasis'. The reader gathers something of what Longinus must have meant, but I doubt that he is illuminated.
5. *De Institutione Oratoria*, book 8, part 6, section 59.

6. I take these to be 'sources'; see *The Fairie Queene*, Book II, Canto VIII, stanza ii, 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', l. 21, and *Paradise Lost*, IV 977, VI 16.
7. The eliciting of military glamour from the card game may surely derive from the passage in Boileau's *Satire X* (the satire 'against women' which could be expected to have interested Pope for the *Rape*) where he derides the wife addicted to gaming. The wife is surrounded by 'noble champions' (l. 222), a basset 'tournament' is disposed on 'a long table fashioned for the purpose' (ll. 223–4), and a 'field' is prepared for combat (l. 227). One of the games mentioned is ombre (l. 230).
8. As Boileau criticised the misuse of syntactic reordering, so Pope ridicules the misuse of periphrasis, at various moments in *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*. To every misuse there is, of course, a use, and this is even true of another of Scriblerus's attacks, on 'the mixture of figures', where 'an ingenious Artist painting the *Spring*, talks of a *Snow* of Blossoms, and thereby raises an unexpected Picture of *Winter*' (ch. X). His example leads to the striking and thoroughly meaningful opening of Eliot's 'Little Gidding', to the vision of a 'midwinter spring' where the hedgerow is blanched 'with transitory blossom / Of snow'.
9. Wordplay in Pope is, of course, rife. An interlingual pun even seems to have sidled into l. 61 of *An Essay on Criticism*, where he bases 'So *vast* is Art, so *narrow* Human Wit' on the Latin tag, 'Ars longa, vita brevis est', and changes the thought by moving from *vita* to *wit*.

CHAPTER 4: 'TRUE EXPRESSION'

1. While we are dealing in footnotes, has it been noticed that Pope here (as also Johnson in his 'Life' of Milton, in the passage that I quoted in the first chapter) seems to be drawing on a nowadays notorious couplet from Boileau's *Art poétique*: 'Ce que l'on conçoit bien s'énonce clairement, / Et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément' (I 153–4), which Soames in 1683 had translated: 'What we conceive, with ease we can express; / Words to the Notions flow with readiness'?
2. See the opening of 'Des ouvrages de l'espirit' in La Bruyère's *Les Caractères, ou les moeurs de ce siècle*, of 1688.
3. See 'Wit in the Essay on Criticism', in Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words* (London, 1951), p. 88.
4. With a skill even more covert, this passage about 'like' also rejects a false 'alikeness' ('All glares *alike*'), which abolishes distinctions. I don't intend to tweak every word, but since another one, 'colour', is related to Latin *celare*, to conceal, there is a semantic as well as a phonetic link between the false eloquence that 'colours' and the true expression that 'clears'. The lines join themselves each to each by the sound sequence '*Glass*', 'gawdy', 'Colours', and 'glares', before reaching a climax in '*Clears*' and then '*gilds*'.
5. For convenience, I have again used J. Ozell's translation, which appeared in the year after the *Essay*. See *The Works of Monsieur Boileau*.

Made English ... By Several Hands (3 vols, London, 1711–13), vol. 2 (1712) p. ii.

CHAPTER 5: WORDSWORTH AND THE 'MYSTERY OF WORDS'

1. Wordsworth used the passage as a 'Prospectus' to his intended three-fold masterwork of *Prelude*, *Excursion* and *Recluse*, by printing it in the preface to *The Excursion*, the only part published in his lifetime. I quote *The Recluse* and the line-numbering of the 'Prospectus' from vol. 5 of *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1949, reprinted 1959).
2. In the concluding lines of the 'Prospectus', where he also enlists Shakespeare and Milton, Wordsworth seems to have wanted to refer to the epic Spenser of *The Fairie Queene*. His request to the Spirit as Muse for the gift of insight,

> that my Song
> With star-like virtue in its place may shine,
> Shedding benignant influence,
>
> (ll. 88–90)

which recalls Milton's 'the Pleiades before him danced, / Shedding sweet influence' (*Paradise Lost*, VII 374–5), also recalls Spenser's address to his Muse Elizabeth:

> Great Ladie of the greatest Isle, whose light
> Like Phoebus lampe throughout the world doth shine,
> Shed thy faire beames ...
>
> ('The First Booke', iv)

His desire for protection from the 'mutations' that extend their sway through the 'nether sphere' also calls up, in the next lines, the 'Mutabilitie' cantos. It may be, given the near-invisibility of the allusions, that Wordsworth was making the links only for his own satisfaction.
3. All references to *The Prelude* are to *William Wordsworth: The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York, 1979). I quote the 1850 text unless otherwise stated. I am grateful to Jonathan Wordsworth for information about the manuscripts of the crucial passage in Book V.
4. See M. H. Abrams, 'The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor', in *English Romantic Poets*, edited by M. H. Abrams (New York, 1975).

CHAPTER 6: HOPKINS AND 'THE WORLD'S WILDFIRE'

1. Respectively from an early diary, April (?) 1864, and the journal, 16 June 1873.
2. When reading 'The Atlantic' it is also worth looking at Hopkins's previous paragraph, and at the entry for 13 Aug. 1874.
3. *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Christopher Devlin, S. J. (London, 1959) p. 195.
4. W. H. Gardner, in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th ed, edited by W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (London, 1967) p. xxx.
5. See his *Articulate Energy* (London, 1955) p. 19.
6. *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (Cambridge, 1983) p. 23.
7. *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, edited by C. C. Abbott (London, 1955) pp. 267–8.
8. *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Catherine Phillips (Oxford, 1986) p. 335.

CHAPTER 7: HARDY: POETRY AND DEATH

1. Donald Davie's expression, in *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London, 1973) p. 48.
2. Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, edited by Michael Millgate (London, 1984) p. 218. The remark dates from 1888.

CHAPTER 8: MARIANNE MOORE: 'TRANSENDENCE CONDITIONAL'

1. *The Ordinary Universe* (London, 1968) p. 50.
2. *Marianne Moore: a Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Charles Tomlinson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969) p. 2.
3. *Poetry and the Age* (London, 1955) p. 164.
4. Reprinted in *Marianne Moore: a Collection of Critical Essays*.
5. *In Defense of Reason* (London, 1960) p. 71.
6. See *Some Americans* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1981) p. 42.
7. *Poetry and the Age*, p. 179.
8. See Bonnie Costello, *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981) pp. 195–6.

CHAPTER 9: YVES BONNEFOY: OBSCURE POSSIBILITY OF THE EARTH

1. There are many English and American translations of Bonnefoy's poetry. Where I have quoted him I have added my own, near-literal, prose translation.
2. The stanza recalls Marvell's 'Bermudas', where God 'hangs in shades

the Orange bright, / Like golden Lamps in a green Night'. Although 'Bermudas' is also concerned with the recovery of paradise, the reminiscence is presumably coincidental.

3. *L'Arrière-pays* (reissue, Geneva and Paris, 1982) p. 56.
4. Ibid., p. 10.
5. *Entretiens sur la poésie* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 1981) p. 140.
6. *L'Improbable et autres essais* (Paris, 1980) p. 129.
7. *L'Arrière-pays*, p. 54.
8. *Entretiens sur la poésie*, p. 37.
9. Ibid., p. 120.
10. Ibid., pp. 29, 32.
11. *L'Arrière-pays*, p. 22.
12. *Entretiens sur la poésie*, pp. 46–7.
13. *L'Arrière-pays*, p. 27.
14. Respectively, 'Navire d'un été', 'Eaux du dormeur, arbre d'absence, heures sans rives', and 'Imagine qu'un soir'.
15. Respectively, *L'Improbable*, p. 251 and *Entretiens sur la poésie*, pp. 20, 23.

CHAPTER 10: CHARLES TOMLINSON'S SEEING AND BELIEVING

1. Letter to the Revd. Dr Trusler, 23 Aug. 1799.
2. In Alan Ross, 'Words and Water: an interview with Charles Tomlinson', *London Magazine*, Jan. 1981, p. 26.
3. From respectively 'At Delft' and 'The Castle' in *Seeing is Believing*.
4. 'The Middlebrow Muse', in *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 7, no. 2, Apr. 1957.
5. For Tomlinson's sense of the mystery of fact, see also his remarkable discussion of the four elements and their interplay in 'The Poet as Painter'. A relation between mystery and fact is central to Carlyle's 'The Hero as Poet' in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. The lecture touches Tomlinson's concerns at a number of major points: seeing, for example, and music and song. A reading of it sharpens one's idea of Tomlinson because of his precise yet large difference from the Fichtean Scot.
6. Respectively, 'The Picture of J. T. in a Prospect of Stone' and 'Harvest Festival: at Ozleworth', in *A Peopled Landscape*. A threshold between gloom and gold is a reworking of the threshold 'between dark and gold' at the end of 'Against Portraits' in *Written on Water*. I discussed these and other antitheses in a previous essay on Tomlinson, 'The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson', *Agenda*, vol. 9, nos. 2–3, spring–summer 1971.
7. I have made all-too-brief attempts on them in the course of two other essays on Tomlinson: 'Charles Tomlinson: Notes on Tradition and Impersonality', *Critical Quarterly*, summer 1973, and 'Charles Tomlinson' in *Donald Davie, Charles Tomlinson, Geoffrey Hill*, Open University Press (Milton Keynes, 1976).
8. Quoted in Geoffrey Grigson's splendid *The English Year* (London, 1967) p. 73, from the *Notebooks*, 8 June 1802.

CHAPTER 11: GEOFFREY HILL'S IMITATIONS

1. '¿ Qué tengo yo que mi amistad procuras?', to be found in J. M. Cohen, *The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1956) p. 247.
2. The poem is reprinted in *Agenda* (Geoffrey Hill special issue), vol. 17, no. 1, spring 1979, p. 59.
3. 'Afectos varios de su corazón ... ', in Cohen, p. 264.
4. 'Llevó tras sí los pámpanos otubre ... ', in Cohen, p. 202.
5. See 'Geoffrey Hill' in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London, 1981).
6. 'Robert Lowell: "Contrasts and Repetitions"', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 13, no. 2, Apr. 1963.
7. See 'Clichés', in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford, 1984).
8. See 'A Few Notes on Geoffrey Hill', *Agenda*, vol. 9, nos. 2–3, spring–summer 1971.

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